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THE THIN RED LINE.

THE THIN RED LINE.

BY

ARTHUR GRIFFITHS,

AUTHOR OF "THE CHRONICLES OF NEWGATE," "FAST AND LOOSE,"
ETC., ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE THIN RED LINE.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMMISSARY IS CALLED.

IN the Paris of the first half of this century there was no darker, dingier, or more forbidding quarter than that which lay north of the Rue de Rivoli, round about the great central market, commonly called the Halles.

The worst part of it, perhaps, was the Rue Assiette d'Etain, or Tinsplate Street. All day evil-looking loafers lounged about its doorways, nodding lazily to the passing workmen, who, blue-bloused, with silk cap on head, each with his loa under his arm, came to take their meals at the wine-shop at the corner; or gossiping with the porters, male and female, while the one followed closely his usual trade as a cobbler, and the other attended to her soup.

By day there was little traffic. Occasionally a long dray, on a gigantic pair of wheels, drawn by a long string of white Normandy horses in single file, with blue harness and jangling bells, filled up the road-

way. Costermongers trundled their barrows along with strange, unmusical cries. Now and again an empty cab returning to its stable, with weary horse and semi-somnolent coachman, crawled through the street.

But at night it was otherwise. Many vehicles came dashing down Tinsplate Street: carriages, public and private, of every variety, from the rattletrap cab hired off the stand, or the decent coach from the livery stable, to the smart spick-and-span brougham, with its well-appointed horses and servants in neat livery. They all set down at the same door, and took up from it at any hour between midnight and dawn, waiting patiently in file in the wide street round the corner, till the summons came as each carriage was required.

As seen in the daytime, there was nothing strange about the door, or the house to which it gave access. The place purported to be an hotel—a seedy, out-at-elbows, seemingly little-frequented hotel, rejoicing in the altogether inappropriate name of the Hôtel Paradis, or the Paradise Hotel. Its outward appearance was calculated to repel rather than invite customers; no one would be likely to lodge there who could go elsewhere. It had habitually a deserted look, with all its blinds and casements close shut, as though its lodgers slept through the day, or had gone away, never to return.

But this was only by day. At night the street-door stood wide open, and a porter was on duty at the foot of the staircase within. He was on the inner side of a stout oaken door, in which was a small window, opening

with a trap. Through this he reconnoitred all arrivals, taking stock of their appearance, and only giving admission when satisfied as to what he saw.

The Hôtel Paradis, in plain English, was a gambling-house, largely patronised, yet with an evil reputation. It was well known to, and constantly watched by, the police, who were always at hand, although they seldom interfered with the hotel.

But when the porter's wife came shrieking into the street early one summer's morning, with wildest terror depicted in her face, and shaking like a jelly, the police felt bound to come to the front.

"Has madame seen a ghost?" asked a stern official in a cocked hat and sword, accosting her abruptly.

"No, no! Fetch the commissary, quick! A crime has been committed—a terrible crime!" she gasped.

This was business, and the police-officer knew what he had to do.

"Run, Jules," he said to a colleague. "You know where M. Bontoux lives. Tell him he is wanted at the Hôtel Paradis." Then, turning to the woman, he said, "Now, madame, explain yourself."

"It is a murder, I am afraid. A gentleman has been stabbed."

"What gentleman? Where?"

"In the drawing-room, upstairs. I don't know his name, but he came here frequently. My husband will perhaps be able to tell you; he is there."

“Lead on,” said the police-officer; “take me to the place. I will see to it myself.”

They passed into the hotel through the inner portal, and up the stairs to the first floor, where the principal rooms were situated—three of them furnished and decorated magnificently, altogether out of keeping with the miserable exterior of the house, having enormous mirrors from ceiling to floor, gilt cornices, damask hangings, marble console tables, and chairs and sofas in marqueterie and buhl. The first room evidently served for reception; there was a sideboard in one corner, on which were the remains of a succulent repast, and dozens of empty bottles. The second and third rooms were more especially devoted to the business of the establishment. Long tables, covered with green cloth, filled up the centre of each, and were strewn with cards, dice and their boxes, croupier’s rakes, and other implements of gaming.

The third room had been the scene of the crime. There upon the floor lay the body of a man, a well-dressed man, wearing the white kerseymere trousers, the light waistcoat, and long-tailed green coat which were then in vogue. His clothes were all spotted and bedrabbled with gore; his shirt was torn open, and plainly revealed the great gaping wound from which his life’s blood was quickly ebbing away.

The wounded man’s head rested on the knee of the night porter, a personage wearing a kind of livery, a

strongly built, truculent-looking villain, whose duties, no doubt, comprised the putting of people out as well as the letting them into the house.

“Oh, Anatole ! my cherished one !” began the porter’s wife. “Here are the police. Tell us then, how this occurred.”

“I will tell all I know,” replied her husband, looking at the police-officer. “This morning, when the clients had nearly all gone, and I was sitting half asleep in the lodge, I heard——”

“Stop” said the police-officer, “not another word. Keep all you have to say for the commissary. He is already on the stairs.”

The next minute M. Bontoux entered, accompanied by his clerk and the official doctor of the quarter.

“A crime,” said the commissary, slowly, and with as much dignity as was possible in a middle-aged gentleman pulled from his bed at day-break, and compelled to dress in a hurry. “A crime,” he repeated. “Of that there can be no doubt. But let us establish the fact formally. Where are the witnesses ?”

The porter, having relinquished the care of the wounded man to the doctor, stood up slowly and saluted the commissary.

“Very well ; tell us what you know. Sit down”—this to the clerk. “Produce your writing-materials and prepare the report.”

“It must have been about four this morning, but I was very drowsy, and the gentlemen had nearly all

gone," said the night porter, speaking fluently, "when I was disturbed by the noise of a quarrel, a fight, up here in the principal drawing-room. While I was still rubbing my eyes, for I was very drowsy, and fancied I was dreaming, I heard a scream, a second, and a third, followed by a heavy fall on the floor. I rushed upstairs then, and found this poor gentleman as you see him."

"Alone?"

"Quite alone."

"But there must have been other people here. Did they come down the stairs past you?"

"No, sir; they must have escaped by that window. It was open——"

The commissary looked at the police-officer, who nodded intelligently.

"I had already noticed it, Mr. Commissary. The window gives upon a low roof, which communicates with the back street. Escape would be quite easy from that side."

"Well," said the commissary, "and you found this gentleman? Do you know him? His name? Have you ever seen him before?"

"He is M. le Baron d'Enot; he is a constant visitor at the house. Very fortunate, I believe, and I heard he won largely last night."

"Ah!" said the commissary. This fact was important, as affording a reason for the crime. "And do you suspect any one? Have you any idea who was here at the last?"

“I scarcely noticed the gentlemen as they went away; it would be impossible for me, therefore, to say who remained.”

“Then there is no clue——”

“Hush! Mr. Commissary.” It was the doctor’s exclamation. “The victim is still alive, and is trying, I think, to speak.” Evidence given at the point of death has extreme value in every country, under every kind of law. The commissary therefore bent his head, closely attentive to catch any words the dying man might utter.

“Water! water!” he gasped out. “Revenge me; it was a foul and cowardly blow.”

“Who struck you, can you tell us? Do you know him?” inquired the commissary, eagerly.

“Yes. I—know——” The voice grew visibly weaker; it sank into a whisper, and could speak only in monosyllables.

“His name—quick!”

“There — were — three — I had no chance—Gas—coigne——”

“Strange name—not French?”

The dying man shook his head.

“Gasc—tell—Engl——”

It was the last supreme effort. With a long, deep groan, the poor fellow fell back dead.

“How unfortunate!” cried the commissary, “to die just when he would have told us all. These few words

will scarcely suffice to identify the murderers. Can any one help us?"

M. Bontoux looked round.

"The name he mentioned I know," said the night-porter, quickly. "This M. Gascoigne came here frequently. He is an Englishman."

"So I gathered from the dead man's words. Do you know his domicile in Paris?"

"Rue St. Honoré, Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud. I have seen him enter it more than once, with his wife. He has lived there some months."

"We must, if possible, lay hands on him at once. You, Jules, hasten with another police-agent to the Rue St. Honoré; he may have gone straight to his hotel."

"And if we find him?"

"Arrest him and take him straight to the Préfecture. I will follow. There, there! lose no time."

"I am already gone," said the police-officer as he ran downstairs.

CHAPTER II.

ARREST AND INTERROGATION.

THE Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud was one of the best hotels of Paris at this time, a time long antecedent to the opening of such vast caravansaries as the Louvre, the Continental, the Athenée, or the Grand. It occupied four sides of a courtyard, to which access was had by the usual gateway. The porter's lodge was in the latter, and this functionary, in sabots and shirt-sleeves, was sweeping out the entrance when the police arrived in a cab, which they ordered to wait at the door.

"M. Gascoigne?" asked the agent.

"On the first floor, number forty-three," replied the porter, without looking up. "Monsieur has but just returned," he went on. "Knock gently, or you may disturb him in his first sleep."

"We shall disturb him in any case," said the police-officer, gruffly. "Justice cannot wait."

"The police!" cried the porter, now recognising his

visitors for the first time. "What has happened, in Heaven's name?"

"Stand aside; we have no time to gossip," replied the agent, as he passed on.

The occupant of No. 43 upon the first floor was pacing his room with agitated steps—a young man with fair complexion and light curly hair; but his blue eyes were clouded, and his fresh, youthful face was drawn and haggard. His attire, too—English, like his aspect—was torn and dishevelled, his voluminous neckcloth was disarranged, his waistcoat had lost several buttons, and there were stains—dark purple stains—upon sleeves and smallclothes.

"What has become of her?" he was saying as he strode up and down; "she has not been here; she could not have come home when we parted at the door of the Vaudeville—the bed has not been slept in. Can she have gone? Is it possible that she has left me?"

He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

"It was too horrible. To see him fall at my feet, struck down just when I—— Who is there?" he cried suddenly, in answer to a knock at the door.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

"The police here already! What shall I do?"

"Open at once, or we shall force the door."

The young man slowly drew back the bolt and admitted the two police-agents.

"M. Gascoigne? You will not answer to your name? That is equal—we arrest you."

“On what charge?”

“It is not our place to explain. We act by authority: that is enough. Will you go with us quietly, or must we use force?”

“Of what am I accused?”

“You will hear in good time. Isidore, where is your rope?”

His colleague produced the long thin cord that serves instead of handcuffs in France.

“Must we tie you?”

“No, no! I am ready to submit, but under protest. You shall answer for this outrage. I am an Englishman. I will appeal to our ambassador.”

“With all my heart! We are not afraid. But enough said. Come.”

The three—police-agents and their prisoner—went out together. On the threshold of No. 43 the officer named Jules said—

“Your key, monsieur—the key of your room. I will take charge of it. Monsieur the Judge will no doubt make a searching perquisition, and no one must enter it till then.”

The door was locked, M. Jules put the key in his pocket, and the party went down to the cab, which was driven off rapidly to the dépôt of the Préfecture.

Here the usual formalities were gone through. Rupert Gascoigne, as the Englishman was called, was interrogated, searched, deprived of money, watch, penknife, and pencil-case; his description was noted down, and

then he was asked whether he would go into the common prison, or pay for the accommodation of the *pistole* or private "side."

For sixteen sous daily they gave him a room to himself, with a little iron cot, a chair, and a table. Another franc or two got him his breakfast and dinner, and he was allowed to enjoy them with such appetite as he could command.

No one came near him till next morning, when he was roused from the heavy sleep that had only come to him after dawn by a summons to appear before the *Juge d'instruction*.

He was led by two policemen to a little room, barely furnished, with one great bureau, or desk, in the centre, at which sat the judge, his back to the window. On one side of him was a smaller desk for the clerk, and exactly opposite a chair for the accused, so arranged that the light beat full upon his face.

"Sit down," said the judge, abruptly.

He was a stern-looking man, dressed all in black, still young, with a cold and impassive face, the extreme pallor of which was heightened by his close-cut, coal-black hair, and his small, piercing, beady black eyes.

"Your name and nationality?"

"Rupert Gascoigne. I am an Englishman, and as such I must at once protest against the treatment I have received."

"You have been treated in accordance with the law—of France. You must abide by it, since you choose

to live here. I do not owe you this explanation, but I give it to uphold the majesty of the law."

"I shall appeal to our ambassador."

The judge waved his hand, as though the threat did not affect him.

"I must ask you to keep silence. You are here to be interrogated; you will only speak in reply to my questions."

There was a pause, during which judge and accused looked hard at each other; the former seeking to read the other's inmost thoughts, the latter meeting the gaze with resolute and unflinching eyes.

"What is your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"But your wife has left you."

Gascoigne started in spite of himself.

"How do you know that?" he asked, nervously.

"It is for me to question. But I know it: that is enough. Your occupation and position in life?"

"I am a gentleman, living on my means."

"It is false." An angry flush rose to Gascoigne's face as the judge thus gave him the lie. "It is false—you are a professional gambler—a Greek—a sharper, with no ostensible means!"

"Pardon me, monsieur; you are quite misinformed. I could prove to you——"

“It would be useless ; the police have long known and watched you.”

“Such espionage is below contempt,” cried Gascoigne, indignantly.

“Silence ! Do not dare to question the conduct of the authorities. It is the visit of persons of your stamp to Paris that renders such precautions necessary.”

“If you believe all you hear from your low agents, with their lying, scandalous reports——”

“Be careful, prisoner ; your demeanour will get you into trouble. Our information about you is accurate and trustworthy. Judge for yourself.”

Gascoigne looked incredulous.

“Listen ; you arrived in Paris three months ago, accompanied by a young demoiselle whom you had decoyed from her home.”

“She was my wife.”

“Yes ; you married her after your arrival here. The official records of the 21st arrondissement prove that—married her without her parents’ consent.”

“That is not so. They approved.”

“How could they ? Your wife’s father is French vice-consul at Gibraltar. Her mother is dead. Neither was present at your marriage ; how, then, could they approve ?”

Gascoigne did not answer.

“On your first arrival you were well provided with funds—the proceeds, no doubt, of some nefarious scheme ;

a run of luck at the tables; the plunder of some pigeon——”

“The price of my commission in the English Army.”

“Bah! You never were in the English Army.”

“I can prove it.”

“I shall not believe you. Being in funds, I say, you lived riotously, stayed at one of the best hotels, kept a landau and pair, dined at the *Trois Frères* and the *Rocher de Cancale*, frequented the theatres; madame wore the most expensive toilettes. But you presently ran short of cash.”

“It’s not surprising. But I presume I was at liberty to do what I liked with my own.”

“Coming to the end of your resources,” went on the judge, coldly ignoring the sneer, “you tried the gaming-table again, with varying success. You went constantly to the *Hôtel Paradis*——”

“On the contrary, occasionally, not often.”

“You were there last night; it is useless to deny it. We have the deposition of the proprietor, who is well known to the police—*M. Hippolyte Ledantec*; you shall be confronted with him.”

“Is he in custody?” asked *Gascoigne*, eagerly.

“I tell you it is not your place to question.”

“He ought to be. It was he who committed the murder.”

“You know there was a murder, then? Curious. When the body was discovered by the porter there was

no one present. How could you know of the crime unless you had a hand in it?"

"I saw it committed. I tried my best to save the Baron, but Ledantec stabbed him before I could interpose."

"An ingenious attempt to shift the guilt; but it will not serve. We know better."

"I am prepared to swear it was Ledantec. Why should I attack the Baron? I owed him no grudge."

"Why? I will tell you. For some time past, as I have reminded you, your funds have been running low, fortune has been against you at the tables, and you could not correct it at the Hôtel Paradis as you do with less clever players——"

"You are taking an unfair advantage of your position, Monsieur le Juge. Any one else who dared accuse me of cheating——"

"Bah! no heroics. You could not correct fortune, I say; yet money you must have. The hotel-keeper was pressing for his long-unpaid account. Madame, your smart wife, was dissatisfied; she made you scenes because you refused her money; in return, you ill-used her."

"It is false! My wife has always received proper consideration at my hands."

"You ill-used her, ill-treated her; we have it from herself."

"Do you know, then, where she is?" interrupted

Gascoigne, with so much eagerness that it was plain he had taken his wife's defection greatly to heart. "Why has she left me? With whom? I have always suspected that villain Ledantec; he is an arch scoundrel, a very devil!"

"The reasons for your wife's disappearance are sufficiently explained by this letter."

"To me?" said Gascoigne, stretching out his hand for it.

"To you, but impounded by us. It was found, in our search of your apartments yesterday, placed in a prominent place upon your dressing-table."

"Give it me—it is mine!"

"No! but you shall hear what it says. Listen:—

" 'I could have borne with resignation the miserable part you have imposed upon me. After luring me from my home with dazzling offers, after promising me a life of luxury and splendid ease, you rudely, cruelly dispelled the illusion, and made it plain to me that I had shared the lot of a pauper. All this I could have borne—poverty, however distasteful, but not the infamy, the degradation, of being the partner and associate of your evil deeds. Sooner than fall so low I prefer to leave you for ever. Do not seek for me. I have done with you. All is at an end between us! ' "

CHAPTER III.

THE MOUSETRAP.

“WELL,” said the judge, when he had finished reading, “you see what your wife thinks of you. What do you say now?”

“There is not a word of truth in that letter. It is a tissue of misstatements from beginning to end. You must place no reliance upon it.”

“There you must allow me to differ from you. This letter is, in my belief, perfectly genuine. It supplies a most important link in the chain of evidence, and I shall give it the weight it deserves. But enough—will you still deny your guilt?”

“It is Ledantec’s doing,” said Gascoigne, following out a line of thought of his own. “She was nothing loth, perhaps, for he has been instilling insidious poison into her ears for these weeks past. I had my sus-

picious, but could prove nothing ; now I know. It was for this, to put money in his purse for her extravagance, that he first robbed, then struck down the baron."

"Why do you still persist in this shallow line of defence? You cannot deceive me; it would be far better to make a clean breast of it at once."

"I have already told you all I know. I repeat, I saw Ledantec strike the blow."

"Psha! this is puerile. I will be frank with you. We have the fullest and strongest evidence of your guilt—why, then, will you not confess it?"

"I have nothing to confess; I am perfectly innocent. I was the poor man's friend, not his murderer. I tried hard to save him, but, unhappily, I was too late."

"You will not confess?"

A flush of anger rose to Gascoigne's cheek; his eyes flashed with the indignation he felt at being thus bullied and browbeaten; his lips quivered, but still he made no reply.

"Come! you have played this comedy long enough," said the judge, his manner growing more insolent, his look more threatening. "Will you, or will you not, confess?"

Gascoigne met his gaze resolutely, but with a dogged, obstinate silence, the result of a firm determination not to utter a word.

"This is unbearable," said the judge, angrily, after having repeated his question several times without eliciting any reply. "Take him away! Let him be kept in

complete isolation, in one of the separate cells of the Mousetrap—the Souricière.”

At a signal from within the police entered, resumed charge of the prisoner, and escorted him, by many winding passages, down a steep staircase to an underground passage, ending in a dungeon-like room, badly lighted by one small, heavily-barred window, through which no glimpse of the sky was seen.

Here he was left alone, and for a long time utterly neglected. No one came near him till late in the day, when he was brought a basin of thin soup and a hunch of coarse ammunition bread. He spoke to his jailers, asking for more and better food, but obtained no reply. He asked them for paper, pens, and ink; he wished, he said, to make a full statement of his case to the British Embassy, and demand its protection. Still no reply. Maddened by this contemptuous treatment, and despairing almost of justice, he begged, entreated the warder to take pity on him, to tell him at least how long they meant to keep him there in such terrible solitude, cut off altogether from the advice and assistance of friends. The warder shook his head stolidly, and at length broke silence, but only to say, “It is by superior order,” then left him.

Gascoigne passed a terrible night, the second night in durance, but far worse than the first. He was torn now with apprehensions as to his fate; circumstances seemed so much against him; the facts, as stated by the judge, might be grossly misrepresented; but how was

he to dispute them? There was no justice in this miserable country, with such a partial and one-sided system of law. He began to fear that his life was in their hands; already he felt his head on the block, under the shadow of the awful guillotine.

Nor were his personal terrors the only nightmare that visited and oppressed him. He was harassed, tortured, by the shameless conduct of his wife; of the woman for whom he had sacrificed everything—profession, fortune, name, the affection of relatives, the respect of friends. With base, black-hearted perfidy, she had deserted him for another, had plotted against him, had helped to bring him into his present terrible straits.

Once again they awoke him, unrefreshed, from the deep sleep haunted by such hideous dreams. He was told to dress himself and come out. At the door of his cell the same escort—two police-agents—awaited him.

“Where are you taking me? Again before that hateful judge?”

“Monsieur had better speak more respectfully,” replied one of them, in a warning voice.

“It is no use, I tell you, his interrogating me. I have nothing more to say.”

“Silence!” cried the other, “and march.”

They led him along the passage and upstairs, but not, as before, to the judge’s cabinet. Turning aside, they passed on one side of it, and out into the open air. There was a cab drawn up close to the door, the prisoner was ordered to get in, one police-agent taking his sea

alongside, the other mounting on the box. The glasses were drawn up, and the cab drove rapidly away.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Gascoigne.

“You will see,” replied his conductor, coldly.

“To another prison?”

“Silence! A prisoner is not permitted to enter into conversation with his guard.”

Thus rebuffed, Gascoigne resigned himself to gazing mournfully through the windows as the cab rattled along. He did not know this quarter of Paris well, but he could see that they were passing along one of the quays of the Ile de la Cité. He could see the houses on the opposite bank, and knew from the narrowness of the river that it was not the main stream of the Seine. It was still early morning; the streets were not as yet very crowded, but as the cab entered a wide square it came upon a throng issuing from the portals of a large church, the congregation that had been attending some celebration at Notre Dame. He recognised the church as he passed it, still driving, however, by the quays. Then they came to a low building, with a dirty, ill-kept, unpretentious doorway. The cab passed through into an inner court, stopped, and Gascoigne was ordered to alight.

The police-agents, one on each side of him, took him to a rather large but dirty, squalid-looking room, which might have been part of an old-clothes shop. All round, hanging from pegs, each neatly ticketed with its own number, were sets of garments, male and female, of every

description : rags and velvets, a common blouse and good broadcloth, side by side.

At a small common table in the centre of the room sat Gascoigne's judge, with the same cold face, only darkened now by a frown.

"Once more," he said, abruptly—"will you confess your crime?"

Gascoigne looked at him contemptuously, but held his tongue.

"Do you still refuse? Do you still obstinately persist in remaining dumb? Very well, we shall see." The judge got up from his chair, and disappeared through a side-door.

After a short pause, Gascoigne's escort bade him march, and the three followed through the same door.

They entered a second chamber, smaller than the first, the uses of which were at once obvious to Gascoigne, although he had never been there before. It was like a low shed or workroom, lighted from above, perfectly plain—even bald—in its decoration, but in the centre, occupying the greater part of the space, and leaving room only for a passage around, was a large flat slab of marble, something like that seen in fishmongers' shops. The similarity was maintained by the sound of water constantly flowing and falling upon the marble slab, as though to keep it and its burden always fresh and cool.

But that burden! Three corpses, stark naked but for a decent waistband, were laid out upon the marble

table. One was that of a child who had been fished up from the Seine that morning ; the second that of a stonemason who had fallen from a scaffolding and broken his neck and both legs ; the third was the murdered man of the Hôtel Paradis, the Baron d'Enot, stripped of his well-made clothes, lying stark and stiff on his back, with the great knife-wound gaping red and festering in his breast.

“There!” cried the judge, triumphantly, leaning forward to scrutinise narrowly the effect of this hideous confrontation upon the prisoner.

To his bitter disappointment, this carefully prepared theatrical effect, so frequently practised and so often successful with French criminals, altogether failed with Gascoigne. The Englishman certainly had started at the first sight of the corpse, but it was a natural movement of horror which might have escaped any unconcerned spectator at being brought into the presence of death in such a hideous form. After betraying this first and not unnatural sign of emotion, Gascoigne remained perfectly cool, self-possessed, and unperturbed.

“You see your victim there ; now will you confess?” cried the judge, almost passionately.

“Ledantec’s victim, not mine,” replied Gascoigne, quietly. Then, as if in apology to himself, he added, “I could not help speaking, but I shall say nothing more.”

“He is very strong, extraordinarily strong!” cried the judge, his rage giving place to admiration at the

obstinate fortitude of his prisoner. "In all my experience"—this was to the police and the chief custodian of the Morgue—"I have never come across a more cold-blooded, cynical wretch; but he shall not beat me; he shall not outrage and set the law at defiance; we will bend his spirit yet. Take him back to the Mousetrap; he shall stay there until he chooses to speak."

With this unfair threat, which was tantamount to a sentence of unlimited imprisonment, the judge dismissed his prisoner.

Gascoigne was marched back to the cab; the police-agents ordered him to re-enter it; one of them took his seat by his side as before, the other remounted the box. Then the cab started on its journey back to the Préfecture.

Gascoigne, silent, preoccupied, and outwardly calm, was yet inwardly consumed with a fierce though impotent rage. He was indignant at the shameful treatment he had received. To be arraigned as a criminal prematurely, his guilt taken for granted on the testimony of unseen witnesses whose evidence he had no chance of rebutting—all this, so intolerable to the spirit of British justice, revolted him and outraged his sense of fair play.

Yet what could he do? He was without redress. They had denied him his right of appeal to his ambassador; he was forbidden to communicate with his

friends. There seemed no hope for him, no chance of justice, no loophole of escape.

Stay ! Escape ?

As the thought flashed quickly across his brain it lingered, taking practical shape. Surely it was worth his while to make an effort, to strike one bold blow for liberty now, before it was too late !

He quickly cast up the chances for and against. The cab was following the line of quays as before, but along the northern bank of the island, that bordering the main stream. It was going at little better than a foot's pace ; the door next which he sat was on the side of the river. What if he knocked his guardian senseless, striking him a couple of British blows—one, two, straight from the shoulder—then, flinging open the door, spring out, and over the parapet into the swift-flowing Seine ? He was an excellent swimmer ; once in the water, surely he might trust to his luck !

These were the arguments in his favour. Against him were the chances that his companion might show fight ; that he might check his prisoner's exit until his comrade on the box could come to the rescue ; or that some officious bystander might act on the side of the law ; or that a shot might drop him as he fled ; or, finally, and most probably of all, that he might be drowned in the turbulent stream.

Gascoigne was not long in coming to a decision. "Nothing venture, nothing have," was his watchword.

At this moment the cab was near the end of the Quai aux Fleurs, near the Pont d'Arcole. There was no time to be lost; at any moment it might turn down from the river, taking one of the cross streets. Setting his teeth firmly, and nerving himself for a supreme effort, Gascoigne sprang suddenly upon the police-agent, twisted his hands inside the stiff stock, and, having thus nearly throttled him, felled him with two tremendous blows.

With a groan, the man fell to the bottom of the cab; the next instant Gascoigne had opened the door and dropped into the roadway.

The escape was observed by one or two passers-by; but they were evidently people who owed the police no good-will, for, although they stood still to watch the fugitive, they did not give the alarm. This came first from the policeman who had been assaulted, who, recovering quickly from the attack, roared lustily to his fellow for help. The cab stopped, the officials alighted hurriedly, and looking to right and left caught sight of Gascoigne as he stood upon the parapet and made his plunge into the river. Both rushed to the spot, pistol in hand.

Down below was the figure of their escaped prisoner battling with the rapid stream. Both fired, almost simultaneously, and one at least must have hit the mark.

Gascoigne's body turned over and then sank, leaving a small crimson stain upon the water.

Was he killed ? Drowned ? That is what no one could tell ; but it was certain that no corpse answering the Englishman's description was ever recovered from the river ; nor, on the other hand, did the police, in spite of an active pursuit, lay hands on their prisoner again alive.

CHAPTER IV.

A SPIDER'S WEB.

SOME half a dozen years after the occurrences just recorded there was a great gathering one night at Essendine House, a palatial mansion occupying the whole angle of a great London square. The reception-rooms upon the first floor, five of them, and all *en suite*, and gorgeously decorated in white and gold, were brilliantly lighted and thrown open to the best of London society. Lady Essendine was at home to her friends, and seemingly she had plenty of them, for the place was thronged.

The party was by way of being musical—that is to say, a famous pianist had been engaged to let off a lot of rockets from his finger-tips, and a buffo singer from the opera roared out his “Figaro la, Figaro quà,” with all the strength of his brazen lungs; while one or two

gifted amateurs sang glees in washed-out, apologetical accents, which were nearly lost in the din of the room.

But there was yet another singer, whose performance was attended with rather more display. It was precluded by a good deal of whispering and nodding of heads. Lady Essendine posed as a charitable person, always anxious to do good, and this singer was a *protégée* of hers—an interesting but unfortunate foreigner in very reduced circumstances, whom she had discovered by accident, and to whom she was most anxious to give a helping hand.

“A sweet creature,” she had said quite audibly that evening, although the object of her remarks was at her elbow. “A most engaging person; poor thing, when I found her she was almost destitute. Wasn’t it sad?”

“Quite pretty, too,” her friends had remarked, also ignoring the near neighbourhood of the singer.

It did not seem to matter much. The stranger sat there calmly, proudly unconscious of all that was said about her. Pretty!—the epithet was well within the mark. Beautiful, rather—magnificently, splendidly beautiful, with a noble presence and almost queenly air. Her small, exquisitely-proportioned head, crowned with a coronet of deep chestnut hair, was well poised upon a long, slender neck; she had a refined, aristocratic face, with clear-cut features, a well-shaped, aquiline nose, with slender nostrils; a perfect mouth, great lustrous dark eyes, with brows and lashes rather darker than

her hair. Her teeth were perfect—perhaps she knew it, for her lower lip hung down a little, constantly displaying their pearly whiteness, and adding somewhat to the decided outline of the firm well-rounded chin.

Seated, her beauty claimed attention; but her appearance was still more attractive when she stood up and moved across the room, to take her seat at the piano. Her figure was tall and commanding, full, yet faultless in outline, as that of one in the prime of ripe, rich womanhood, and its perfect proportions were fully set off by her close-fitting but perfectly plain black dress.

A little hum of approval greeted her from this well-bred audience as she sat down and swept her fingers with a flourish over the keys. Then, without further prelude, she sang a little French song in a pleasing, musical voice, without much compass, but well trained; before the applause ended she broke into a Spanish ballad, tender and passionate, which gained her still greater success; and thus accepted and approved amidst continual cries of “Brava!” and “Encore!” she was not allowed to leave her seat until she had sung at least a dozen times.

When she arose from the piano Lady Essendine went up to her, patronising and gracious.

“Oh! thank you so much. I don’t know when I have heard anything so charming.”

Other ladies followed suit, and, amidst the general cries of approval, the beautiful singer was engaged a dozen deep to sing at other great houses in the town.

Presently they pressed her to perform again. Was she not paid for it? No one, Lady Essendine least of all, thought for one moment of her *protégée's* fatigue, and the poor singer might have worked on till she fainted from exhaustion had not the son of the house interposed.

"You must be tired, mademoiselle," said Lord Lydstone, coming up to the piano. "Surely you would like a little refreshment? Let me take you to the tea-room," and, offering his arm, he led her away, despite his mother's black looks and frowns of displeasure.

"Lydstone is so impulsive," she whispered to the first confidant she could find. It was Colonel Wilders, one of the family—a poor relation, in fact, commonly called by them "Cousin Bill"—a hale, hearty, middle-aged man, with grey hair he was not ashamed of, but erect and vigorous, with a soldierly air. "I wish he would not advertise himself with such a person in this way."

"A monstrously handsome person!" cried the blunt soldier, evidently cordially endorsing Lord Lydstone's taste.

"That's not the question, Colonel Wilders; it was not my son's place to take her to the tea-room, and I am much annoyed. Will you, to oblige me, go and tell Lydstone I want to speak to him?"

Cousin Bill, docile and obsequious, hurried off to execute her ladyship's commission. He found the pair chatting pleasantly together in a corner of the deserted tea-room, and delivered his message.

"Oh, bother!" cried Lord Lydstone undutifully. "What can mother want with me?"

"You had better go to her," said the colonel, who was a little afraid of his cousin, the female head of the house. "I will take your place here—that is to say, if mademoiselle will permit me."

"Madame," corrected Lord Lydstone, who had been already put right himself. "Let me introduce you. Madame Cyprienne—my cousin, Colonel Wilders, of the Royal Rangers. I hope we shall hear you sing again to-night, unless you are too tired."

"I shall do whatever *miladi* wishes," said Madame Cyprienne, in a deep but musical voice, with a slight foreign accent. "It is for her to command, me to obey. She has been very kind, you know," she went on to Colonel Wilders, who had taken Lydstone's seat by her side. "But for her I should have starved."

"Dear me! how sad," said the colonel. "Was it so bad as that? How did it happen. Was M. Cyprienne unlucky?"

She did not answer; and the colonel, wondering, looked up, to find her fine eyes filled with tears.

"How stupid of me! What an idiot I am! Of course, your husband is——"

She pointed to her black dress, edged with crape, but said nothing.

"Yes, yes! I quite understand. Pray forgive me," stammered the colonel, and there followed an awkward pause.

“Mine is a sad story,” she said at length, in a sorrowful tone. “I was left suddenly alone, unprotected, without resources, in this strange country—to fight my own battle, to earn a crust of bread by my own exertions, or starve.”

“Dear, dear!” said the colonel, his sympathies fully aroused.

“I should have starved, but for Lady Essendine. She heard of me. I was trying to dispose of some lace—some very old Spanish point. You are a judge of lace, monsieur?”

“Of course, of course!” said the colonel, although, as a matter of fact, he did not know Spanish point from common *écru*.

“This was some lace that had been in our family for generations. You must understand we were not always as you see me—poor; we belong to the old nobility. My husband was highly born, but when he died I dropped the title and became Madame Cyprienne. It was better, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps so; I am not sure,” replied the colonel, hardly knowing what to say.

“It was. The idea of a countess a pauper, begging her bread!”

“What was your title, may I ask?” inquired the colonel, eagerly. These tender confidences, accompanied by an occasional encouraging glance from her bright eyes, were rapidly increasing the interest he took in her.

"I am the Countess de Saint Clair," replied Madame Cyprienne, proudly; "but I do not assume the title now. I do not choose it to be known that I live by singing, and by selling the remnants of our family lace."

"I hope Lady Essendine paid you a decent price," said the colonel, pleasantly.

Madame Cyprienne shook her head, with a little laugh—

"She has been very kind—exceedingly kind—but she knows how to drive a bargain: all women do."

"What a shame! And have you sold it all? You had better entrust me with the disposal of the rest."

"Oh! Colonel Wilders, I could not think of giving you so much trouble."

"But I will; I should like to. Send it to me. My chambers are in Ryder Street; or, better still, I will call for it if you will tell me where," said the colonel, artfully.

"I am lodging in a very poor place, not at all such as the Countess de Saint Clair should receive in. But I am not ashamed of it; it is in Frith Street, Soho, No. 29A; but I do not think you ought to come there."

"A most delightful part of the town," said the colonel, who at the moment would have approved of Whitechapel or the New Cut. "When shall I call?"

"In the afternoon. In the morning I am engaged in giving lessons. But come, we have lingered here long enough. *Miladi* will expect me to sing again."

Lady Essendine frowned at Cousin Bill when he brought back her singer; but whether it was at the length of the talk, or the withdrawal of her *protégée* from the duties for which she was paid, her ladyship did not condescend to explain. It was a little of both. She was pleased to have hindered her son from paying marked attention to a person in Madame Cyprienne's doubtful position. Now she found that person exercising her fascinations upon Colonel Wilders, and it annoyed her, although Cousin Bill was surely old enough to take care of himself. Already she was changing her opinion concerning the fair singer she had introduced into the London world. She could not fail to notice the admiration Madame Cyprienne generally received, especially from the men, and she doubted whether she had done wisely in taking her by the hand.

A few days later she had no doubt at all. To her disgust, all the old Spanish point-lace was gone; and Madame Cyprienne had told her plainly that it was her own fault for haggling over the price. Her ladyship's disgust was heightened when she found the best piece of all—a magnificent white mantilla—in the possession of a rival leader of fashion, who refused to say where she had got it, or how.

She set her emissaries at work, however—for every great London lady has a dozen devoted, unpaid *attachés*, ready to do any little commission of this kind—and the lace was traced back to Colonel Wilders.

“My dear,” she said, one morning, to her lord, “I

am afraid Colonel Wilders is very intimate with that Madame Cyprienne."

"Our eccentric Cousin Bill! You don't say so? Well, there's no fool like an old fool," said Lord Essendine, who was a very matter-of-fact, plain-spoken peer.

"I always thought she was an adventuress," cried Lady Essendine, angrily.

"Then why did you take her up so hotly? But for you, no one would ever have heard of the woman, least of all Cousin Bill."

"Well, I have done with her now. I shall drop her."

"The mischief's done. Unless I am much mistaken, she won't drop Cousin Bill."

Lord Essendine, who was, perhaps, behind the scenes, was not wrong in his estimate of the influence Madame Cyprienne exercised. Before six months were out, Colonel Wilders came, with rather a sheepish air, to the head of the house, and informed him of his approaching marriage to the Countess de Saint Clair.

"That's a new title to me, Bill. Foreign, I suppose?" Lord Essendine had the usual contempt of the respectable Briton for titles not mentioned in Debrett or Burke.

"It's French, I fancy; and for the moment it is in abeyance. Madame Cyprienne tells me ——"

"Gracious powers, William Wilders! have you fallen into that woman's clutches?"

“I must ask you, Lord Essendine, to speak more respectfully of the lady I propose to make my wife.”

“You had better not ! I warn you while there is yet time.”

“What do you know against her ?” asked the colonel, hotly.

“What do you know of or for her ?” replied the peer, quickly. “I tell you, man, it’s a disgrace to the family. Lady Essendine will be furious. If I had any authority over you I would forbid the marriage. In any case,” he went on, “do not look for any countenance or support from me.”

“I hope we shall be able to get on without your assistance, Lord Essendine. I thought it my duty to inform you of my marriage, and I think I might have been better received.”

“Stay, you idiot ; don’t go off in a huff. I don’t like the match, I tell you frankly ; but I don’t want to quarrel. Is there anything I can do for you, except attending the wedding ? I won’t do that.”

Colonel Wilders could not bring himself to ask any favours of his unsympathetic kinsman. Nevertheless, it was through Lord Essendine’s interest that he obtained a snug staff appointment in one of the large garrison towns ; and he did not return indignantly the very handsome cheque paid in by his cousin to his account as a wedding present.

He was still serving at Chatsmouth, his young and

beautiful wife the life of the gay garrison, when the war-clouds gathered dark upon the horizon, and, thanks again to the Essendine interest, he found himself transferred, still on the staff, to the expeditionary army under orders for the East.

CHAPTER V.

THE WAR FEVER.

THEY were stirring times, those early days of '54. After half a century of peace the shadow of a great contest loomed dark and near. The whole British nation, sick and tired of Russian double-dealing, was eager to cut the knot of political difficulty with the sword. Every one was mad to fight; only a few optimists, statesmen mostly, still relying on the sedative processes of diplomacy, had any hopes of averting war. A race reputed peace-loving, but most pugnacious when roused, was stirred now to its very depths. British hearts beat high throughout the length and breadth of the land, proudly mindful of their former prowess and manfully hopeful of emulating former glorious deeds.

It was the same wherever Englishmen gathered under the old flag; in every corner of the world peopled by offshoots from the old stock, most of all in those strong-

holds and dependencies beyond sea captured in the old wars, and still held by our arms.

It was so upon the great Rock, the commonly counted impregnable fortress, one of the ancient pillars of Hercules that still stands silently strong and watchful at the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea.

Nowhere did the war fever rage higher than at Gibraltar. Before everything, a garrison town, battlemented and fortified on every side, resonant from morning gunfire till watch-setting with martial sounds, its principal pageants military, with soldiers filling its streets, and sentinels at every corner, the prospect of active service was naturally the one theme and topic of the place.

As spring advanced, one of those balmy-scented Southern springs when flowers highly prized with us blossomed wild everywhere, even in the fissures of the rock—when the days are already long and bright, under ever-blue and cloudless skies, Gibraltar realised more fully that war was close at hand. Lying in the high road to the East, it saw daily the armed strength of England sweep proudly by. Now a squadron of men-of-war: not the hideous, shapeless ironclad of to-day, but the traditional three-decker, with its tiers of snarling teeth and its beauty of white-bellying canvas and majestic spar. Now a troopship with its consorts, two, or three, or more, tightly packed with their living cargo—whole regiments of red-coated soldiers on their way to Malta and beyond.

Such sights as these kept the garrison—friends and comrades of those bound eastward—in a state of constant high-pitched excitement. At first, forbidden by strict quarantine, there was no communication between the sea and the shore, but all day long there were crowds of idlers ready to line the sea-wall and greet every ship that came in close enough with hearty repeated cheers. When the vexatious health-rules were relaxed, and troopships landed some of their passengers, there was endless fraternisation, eager discussion of coming operations, and unlimited denunciation of the common foe.

Members of the garrison itself were, of course, frantically jealous of all who had the better luck to belong to the expeditionary force. That they were not under orders for the East was the daily burden of complaint in every barrack-room and guard-house upon the Rock. The British soldier is an inveterate grumbler; he quarrels perpetually with his quarters, his food, his clothing, and his general want of luck. Just now the bad luck of being refused a share in an arduous campaign, with its attendant chances of hardships, sufferings, perhaps a violent death, made every soldier condemned to remain in safety at Gibraltar discontented and sore at heart.

“No orders for us by the last mail, Hyde,” said a young sergeant of the Royal Picts, as he walked briskly up to the entrance of the Waterport Guard.

A tall, well-grown, clean-limbed young fellow of twenty-four or five: one who prided himself on being a

smart soldier, and fully deserved the name. He was admirably turned out; his coatee with wings, showing that he belonged to one of the flank companies, fitted him to perfection; the pale blue trousers, the hideous fashion of the day, for which Prince Albert was said to be responsible, were carefully cut; his white belts were beautifully pipe-clayed, and the use of pipe-clay was at that time an art; you could see your face in the polish of his boots. A smart soldier, and as fine-looking a young fellow as wore the Queen's uniform in 1854. He had an open, honest face, handsome withal; clear bright grey eyes, broad forehead, and a firm mouth and chin.

“Worrying yourself, as usual, for permission to have your throat cut. Can't you bide your time, Sergeant McKay?”

The answer came from another sergeant of the same regiment, an elder, sterner man—a veteran evidently, for he wore two medals for Indian campaigns, and his bronzed, weather-beaten face showed that he had seen service in many climes. As a soldier he was in no wise inferior to his comrade: his uniform and appointments were as clean and correct, but he lacked the extra polish—the military dandyism, so to speak—of the younger man.

“War is our regular trade. Isn't it natural we should want to be at it?” said Sergeant McKay.

“You talk like a youngster who doesn't know what it's like,” replied Sergeant Hyde. “I've seen some-

thing of campaigning, and it's rough work at the best, even in India, where soldiers are as well off as officers here."

"Officers!" said McKay, rather bitterly. "They have the best of it everywhere."

"Hush! don't be an insubordinate young idiot," interposed his comrade, hastily. "Here come two of them."

The sergeants sprang hastily to their feet, and, standing strictly to attention, saluted their superiors in proper military form.

"That's what I hate," went on McKay.

"Then you are no true soldier, and don't know what proper discipline means. They are as much bound to salute us as we them."

"Yes, but they don't."

"That's their want of manners; so much the worse for them. Besides, I am quite sure Mr. Wilders didn't mean it; he is far too good an officer—always civil-spoken, too, and considerate to the men."

"I object to saluting him more than any one else."

"Why, McKay! what's the matter with you? What particular fault have you to find with Mr. Wilders?"

"I am just as good as he is."

"In your own opinion, perhaps; not in that of this garrison—certainly not under the Mutiny Act and Articles of War."

"I am just as good. I am his cousin——"

Sergeant McKay stopped suddenly, bit his lip, and flushed very red.

“So you have let the cat out of the bag at last, my young friend,” said Sergeant Hyde, quietly. “I always thought this—that you were a gentleman——”

“Superior to my station, in fact.”

“By no means, Sergeant McKay. I should be sorry to admit that any man, however highly born, had lost his right to be deemed a gentleman because he is a sergeant in the Royal Picts.”

“You, Hyde, are a gentleman too. I am sure of that.”

“I am a sergeant in the Royal Picts. That is enough for me and for you.”

“Why did you enlist?”

Hyde shook his head gravely.

“There are pages in every man’s life,” he said, “which he does not care to lift again when they are once turned down. I have not asked you for your secret; respect mine.”

“But I have nothing to conceal,” said McKay, quickly. “I am ready enough to tell you why I enlisted.”

“As you please; but, mind, I have not asked you.”

There was little encouragement in this speech; but McKay ignored it, and went on—

“I enlisted because I could not enter the army in any other way. My friends could not afford to purchase me a commission.”

“Why were you so wild to become a soldier?”

“It was my father’s profession. He was a captain in ——”

“That should have given you a claim for an ensigncy, as an officer’s son.”

“But my father was not in the English service. He was only half an Englishman, really.”

“Indeed! How so?”

“Although Scotch by extraction, as our name will tell you, my father was born in Poland. He was a Russian subject, and as such was compelled to serve in the Russian army.”

“For long?”

“Until he was mixed in an unfortunate national movement, and only escaped execution by flight. He lived afterwards at Geneva. It was there he met my mother.”

“Is it through him or her that you are related to the Wilders?”

“Through my mother. She was daughter of the Honourable Anastasius, son of the twelfth earl.”

“And what might be the distinguishing numeral of the present Essendine potentate?”

“He is fourteenth earl.”

“Then he and your mother are first cousins?”

“Quite so; and I am his first cousin once removed.”

“Ah! that is very nice for you,” said old Hyde, with a tinge of contempt in his tone. “They’re not much use to you though, these fine relations. Surely Lord Essendine

could have got you a commission by holding up his hand ? ”

“ That’s just what he would not do, and why I hate him and the whole of the Wilders family. Lord Essendine has never recognised us.”

“ Why ? Is there any reason ? ”

“ The Honourable Anastasius made a poor match, married against his father’s wish, and was cut off with a shilling. His brother, the next earl, was disposed to make it up, but my grandfather died, and my grandmother married again—an honest sea-captain—and the noble peer cut her dead.”

“ And so you joined the Royal Picts. But I wonder you came to this regiment to serve with your cousin.”

“ I enlisted, you know, a couple of years before he was gazetted to the corps.”

“ Do they know you took the shilling ?—that you are now a colour-sergeant in the Royal Picts ? ”

“ I don’t think they are aware of my existence even.”

“ Well, never mind. Don’t be cast down. The time may come when they will be proud to recognise you. It all depends upon yourself ? ”

“ I will do all I know to force them, you may be sure.”

“ And you will have your chance, in a great war like this which is coming. Everything is possible to a man whose heart is in the right place. You have pluck and spirit.”

The young fellow’s eyes flashed.

“Trust me, Hyde; I sha’n’t flinch, if I only get the chance.”

“You are well educated; you can draw; you have picked up Spanish since you have been here; and I suppose you inherit a taste for languages from your Polish father?”

“I don’t know; at any rate, I can talk French fluently, and I speak Russian of course.”

“Why, man! the game is positively in your own hands. You are bound to get on: mark my words.”

“Not if we stay here, Hyde, keeping guard upon this old Rock and losing all the fun. Can you wonder why I am so anxious the regiment should get the route?”

“It will come, never fear. They will want every soldier that carries a musket before this war is over, or I’m a much-mistaken man. Only have patience.”

“How can I? I am eating my heart out, Hyde.”

“Was it to tell me this you came down here? What brings you to Waterport this morning? Only to gossip with me?”

“That, and something more. I am on duty, detailed as orderly sergeant to one of the Expeditionary Generals; he is just going to land from a yacht in the bay.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Yes, Wilders—another of my fine cousins. You can understand now why I am so bitter against my relations to-day: there are too many of them about.”

“I suppose that is what’s brought our Mr. Wilders here to-day—to meet his cousin.”

“And his brother; for they are on board Lord Lydstone’s yacht.”

“They! How many of them?”

“General Wilders has his wife with him, I believe, accompanying him to the East.”

“Old idiot! Why couldn’t he leave her at home? Women are in the way at these times. Soldiers have no business with wives.”

“That’s why you never married, I suppose?”

Hyde did not answer his question, but got up and left his comrade abruptly, to re-enter the guard-room.

CHAPTER VI.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

THE *Arcadia*, Lord Lydstone's yacht, was a fine three-masted schooner of a couple of hundred tons. She was lying far out in the bay, amidst a crowd of shipping of every kind—coal-hulks, black and grimy; H.M.S. *Samarang*, receiving-ship, and home of the captain of the port; British vessels, steamers and sailing-ships, of every rig; foreign craft of every aspect native to its waters: zebecques, faluchas, and polaccas, with their curved spars and heavy lateen sails.

A fleet of small boats surrounded the yacht, native boats of curious build, and manned by dark-skinned natives of the Rock, in nondescript attire—a noisy, pushing, quarrelsome lot, eager to do business, gesticulating wildly, and jabbering loudly in many strange tongues. Here was a pure Spaniard, with a red sash

round his waist, and a velvet cap, round as a cart-wheel, on his head, with a boatful of vegetables and early fruit. There was a grave and sedate Moor, in green turban and white flowing robes, with an assortment of gold-braided slippers and large brass trays. Next a Maltese milk-seller, in scanty garments, nothing but short canvas trousers and a shirt, who had come with cans full of goats'-milk from the herds he kept on the barren slopes of the Rock. Not far off was the galley of the health-officer, with a crew of "scorpion" boatmen in neat white jackets and straw hats.

On the deck of the yacht, under an awning—for the spring sun already beat down hotly at noon—were the owner and his guests. Lord Lydstone, cigar in mouth, lounged lazily upon a heap of rugs and cushions at the feet of Mrs. Wilders, who took her ease luxuriantly in a comfortable cane arm-chair.

Blanche Cyprienne, Countess of St. Clair, had changed little since her marriage. Her beauty had gained rather than lost; her manner was more commanding, her look more haughty. Her fine eyes flashed insolently, or were veiled in lazy disdain, and her voice spoke scornfully or drawled with careless contempt, according to her mood.

"So that is the Rock—the great Rock of Gibraltar," she was saying. "What an extraordinary-looking place!"

"You will say so, Countess, when you get on shore," said Lord Lydstone.

“Is there anything really to see?” she asked. “Is it worth the trouble of landing?”

“Why, of course! I thought it was all settled. The general sent some hours ago to say he proposed to pay his respect to the Governor. You cannot help yourself now.”

“Oh! the general,” remarked Mrs. Wilders, as she was generally styled—the title Countess was only used by intimate friends—in a tone that implied she was not at all bound by her husband’s plans.

“Where is the good man just now?” inquired Lord Lydstone, in much the same tone.

“There, forward,” said Mrs. Wilders, pointing to the part of the deck beyond the awning. “Trying to get a sunstroke by walking about with his head bare.”

“He does that on principle, Countess, don’t you know. He wants to harden his cranium, in case he loses his hat some day in action.”

“I hope he may never go into action. If he does, I should be sorry for his men.”

“Not for him?”

“That may be taken for granted,” she replied, in a matter-of-fact way.

“How fond you are of him! What devoted affection! It’s lucky you have little to spare!”

“I keep it for the proper person.”

“Is there none for his relatives?” asked Lydstone, with a meaning look.

“Do any of them deserve my affection?”

“I try very hard, Countess; and I should so value the smallest crumb.”

“Don’t be foolish, Lord Lydstone! you must not try to make love to me; it would be wrong. Besides, we are too nearly connected now.”

“You never throw me a single kind word, Blanche.”

“Certainly not. I won’t have it on my conscience that I led you astray, poor innocent lamb! A fine thing! What would your people say? They’re bitter enough against me as it is!”

The Essendines had never properly acknowledged Colonel Wilders’s marriage, or treated his wife, the foreign countess, other than with the coldest contempt. Lord Lydstone knew this, and knew too that his mother was right; yet he could not defend her when this woman, whom he admired still—too much, indeed, for his peace of mind—resented her treatment.

“Your mother has behaved disgracefully to me—that you must admit, Lord Lydstone.”

“She is an old-fashioned, old-world lady, with peculiar straitlaced notions of her own. But, if you please, we won’t talk about her.”

“Why not? You cannot pretend that she was right in ignoring me, flouting me, insulting me! Am I not your near relative’s wife? Why, Bill is only four off the title now.”

“One of them being your humble servant, who devoutly hopes that all four will long interpose between

him and the succession," said Lord Lydstone, with a pleasant laugh.

"I don't wish you any harm, of course ; still it is as I say, and my son——"

"Aged two, and at present in England at nurse."

"—May be the future Earl of Essendine."

"He shan't be, if I can prevent it !" cried Lord Lydstone, gaily ; "you may rely on that. But, I say, here is a smart gig coming off from the shore. I believe the Governor has sent his own barge for you. Here, Bill ! I say, Bill !"

General Wilders came aft.

"You had better put on your best clothes, general ; they are coming to fetch you in state."

"I suppose, on this occasion only, you will wear a hat, Bill ?" said Mrs. Wilders.

"I wish you would go down and get ready, my dear ; we ought not to keep the gig," said the general, as he himself went below to dress.

"I am not so sure I shall go on shore at all," replied his wife.

"No !" cried Lord Lydstone. "Throw the general over, and stay on board with me."

"That would be too great penance," said Mrs. Wilders, as she moved towards the companion-ladder. "I've had enough of your lordship for one day."

Lydstone got up, looking rather vexed, and followed her across the deck. When he was quite close to her side he whispered with suppressed but manifest feeling—

“Why do you torture me so? Sometimes I think you care for me; sometimes that you hate and detest me. What am I think?”

“What you choose,” she answered, in a low, quick voice, evidently much displeased. “I have given you no right to speak to me in this way. Let me pass, or I shall appeal to my lawful protector!”

Presently Mrs. Wilders reappeared, dressed to perfection in some cool light fabric, serene and smiling to every one but Lord Lydstone. She was especially gracious to young Mr. Wilders, who had come off in the Governor’s gig, and had been cordially welcomed by his brother.

“Another cousin,” said the general, introducing him. He was now in uniform—the general—in uniform to suit his own fancy rather than the regulations. The only orthodox articles of apparel were his twisted general’s scimitar and a forage-cap with a broad gold band. His coat and waistcoat were of white cloth; he had a wide crimson sash round his waist, and his lower limbs were encased in hunting-breeches and long boots. “Anastasius, one of the Royal Picts.”

“All soldiers, you Wilders, all—except one.” This was specially intended to annoy Lydstone. “The future head of the house is kept in cotton-wool; he is too precious, I suppose, to be risked.”

“It is not my fault,” began Lydstone. It was a sore point with him that he had not been permitted—in deference to his mother’s fond protests—to enter the army.

“Are you not coming with us, Lydstone?” said his young brother, greatly disappointed. “I did want to show you our mess.”

“I know Gibraltar by heart, and I have letters to write. I hope you will enjoy yourself, Countess,” he added, sarcastically, as they went down the side.

“There’s no fear of that, now we have left you behind,” replied Mrs. Wilders, sharply.

“Why can’t you and Lydstone keep better friends?” said General Wilders, a little shocked at this remark.

“It’s his fault, not mine, and that’s enough about it,” replied Mrs. Wilders, rather petulantly. “Did you ever quarrel with your brother,” she went on to Anastasius, “when you were boys?”

“I would not have dared. Not that I wanted to: we three brothers were always the best of friends.”

“You are an affectionate family, Mr. Wilders; I have long been convinced of that,” said Mrs. Wilders, who could not leave the subject alone.

But now the gig, impelled by six stout oarsmen, was nearing the Waterport Guard, and was already under the shadow of the frowning batteries of the Devil’s Tongue. High above them rose the sheer straight wall of the rock, bristling with frowning fortifications, line above line, and countless embrasures armed with heavy artillery.

The wharf itself was crowded with the usual motley polyglot gathering—sailors of all nations, soldiers of the garrison, Spanish peasants from the neighbouring

villages, native scorpions, policemen, and inspectors of strangers.

“How amusing! How interesting! It’s like a scene in a play!” cried Mrs. Wilders, as she stepped ashore.

Escorted by her husband and cousin, they pushed their way through the crowd towards the Waterport gateway, and under it into the main ditch. As they approached there was a cry of “Guard, turn out!” and the Waterport Guard, under its officer, fell in with open ranks to give the general a salute. General Wilders acknowledged the compliment, and, while he stood there with two fingers to his hat, Sergeant McKay advanced and reported himself.

“Your orderly, sir.”

“Eh! what?” said the general, a little surprised. “My orderly! Very considerate of Sir Thomas,” he went on. “One of the Royal Picts, too, and a guard from the same regiment! Most attentive, I’m sure!”

The general went up at once to the front rank of the guard, and proceeded to inspect the men carefully. With his own hands he altered the hang of the knapsacks and the position of the belts; he measured in the regular way, with two fingers, the length of the pouch below the elbow, grumbling to himself as he went along.

“So you use harness-blackening for your pouches. I don’t approve of that. And your pipeclay; it’s got too blue a tinge.”

While he lingered thus fondly over the trifling details

that, to his mind, summed up the whole duty of a general officer, his wife's voice was heard impatiently calling him to her side.

"Come, general, don't be all day! How can you waste time over such nonsense!"

"My dear," said her husband, gravely, as he rejoined her, "this regiment is to form part of my brigade"—McKay pricked up his ears—"it is the first time I have seen any of it. You must allow me——"

"I am going on into the town; inspecting guards doesn't amuse me," and the general discreetly abandoned his professional duties and walked on by her side.

The guard was dismissed by its commander; the men "lodged arms" and went back to the guard-room. Only Sergeant Hyde remained outside, watching the retreating figures of the Wilders' party.

"I should have known her voice again amongst a thousand," said the old sergeant, shaking his head; "and from the glimpse I caught of her she seemed but little changed. I wonder whether she saw me. Not that she would have recognised me; I am not what I was. No one here has made me out, although a dozen years ago I was well known all over the Rock. Besides, how could she see me? I was on the other flank, and, fortunately, she left the general to inspect us by himself. Poor man! I had rather be a sergeant—a private even—than stand in that general's shoes."

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE Wilders' party, after leaving the Waterport, passed through the Casemate Barrack Square and entered Waterport Street, the chief thoroughfare of the town. It was a narrow, unpretending street, very foreign in aspect; the houses tall and overhanging with balconies filled with flowers; the lattice-shutters gaily painted, having outside blinds of brilliantly striped stuffs.

The shop fronts were small, the wares common-place; the best show was at the drapers, where they sold British calicoes and piece-goods in flaunting colours, calculated to suit the local taste.

The street, both pavement and roadway, was crowded. In the former were long strings of pack-horses bringing

in straw and charcoal from Spain; small stout donkeys laden with water-barrels; officers, some in undress uniform, many more in plain clothes, riding long-tailed barbs; occasionally a commissariat wagon drawn by a pair of sleek mules, or a high-hooded *calèche*, with its driver seated on the shafts, cut through the throng. Detachments of troops, too, marched by: recruits returning from drill upon the North Front, armed parties, guards coming off duty, and others going on fatigue—all these cleared the street before them. On the pavement the crowd was as diverse as might be expected, from the mixed population. Stately Moors rubbed elbows with stalwart British soldiers; Barbary Jews, dejected in mien, but with shrewd, cunning eyes, chattered with the itinerant vendors of freshly caught sardines, or the newly-picked fruit of the prickly pear. Now and again, quite out of keeping with her surroundings, a rosy-cheeked British nursemaid passed by escorting her charges—the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired children of the dominant race.

General Wilders walked along with head erect, returning punctiliously the innumerable salutes he received, quite happy, and in his element in this essentially military post and stronghold. Mrs. Wilders seemed also to enjoy the busy, animated scene: it was all so new to her, so different from anything she had expected, as she was at great pains to explain. The sight of this foreign town held by British bayonets

pleased her, she said ; she was proud to think that she was now an Englishwoman.

“ It is your first visit to Gibraltar, then ? ” said young Mr. Wilders, anxious to be civil.

“ Oh, yes ! ” she replied ; “ that is why I am so interested—so amused by all I see.”

Was this absolutely true ? She seemed, as she led the way across the casemate square and up Waterport Street, to know the road without guidance, and once or twice a passer-by paused to look at her. Were they only paying tribute to her radiant beauty, or was her's not altogether an unfamiliar face ?

It was evident that there were those at Gibraltar who knew her, or mistook her for some one else.

As the party reached the Commercial Square, and the main guard, like that at Waterport, turned out to do honour to the general, a man pushed forward from a little group that stood respectfully behind the party, and whispered hoarsely in Mrs. Wilders's ear—

“ *Dios mio ! Cypriana ! Es usted ?* ” (Gracious Heavens ! Cyprienne ! Is it you ?)

Mrs. Wilders stopped and looked round. At that moment, too, young Wilders turned angrily on the man—a black-muzzled, Spanish-looking fellow, dressed in a suit of coarse brown cloth, short jacket, knee-breeches, and leather gaiters—the dress, in fact, of a well-to-do Spanish peasant—and said, sharply, “ How dare you speak to this lady ? What did he say to you, Mrs. Wilders—anything rude ? ”

Mrs. Wilders had recovered herself sufficiently to reply in an unconcerned tone—

“I did not understand his jargon; but it does not matter in the least; don’t make any fuss, I beg.”

The incident had been unobserved by any but these two, and it must have been speedily forgotten by young Wilders, for he said nothing more. But Mrs. Wilders, as they passed on, and for the rest of their walk to the Convent, as the Governor’s residence is still styled, looked anxiously behind to see if the man who had claimed acquaintance with her was still in sight.

Yes; he was following her. What did he mean?

Half an hour later, when the Wilders had made their bow to the Governor, and it had been arranged that the general should attend an inspection of troops upon the North Front, Mrs. Wilders declined to accept the seat in the carriage offered her. She preferred, she said, to explore the quaint old town. Mr. Wilders and one of the Governor’s aides-de-camps eagerly volunteered to escort, but she declined.

“Many thanks, but I’d rather go alone. I shall be more independent.”

“You’ll lose your way; or be arrested by the garrison police and taken before the town major as a suspicious character, loitering too near the fortifications,” said the Governor, who thought it a capital joke.

“No one will interfere with me, I think,” she replied, quietly. “I am quite able to take care of myself.”

She looked it just then, with her firm-set lips and flashing eyes.

“Mrs. Wilders will have her own way,” said her husband. “It’s best to give in to her. That’s what I’ve found,” he added, with a laugh, in which all joined.

When the horses were brought out for the parade, Mrs. Wilders, still persisting in her intention of walking alone, said, gaily—

“Well, gentlemen, while you are playing at soldiers I shall go off on my own devices. If I get tired, Bill, I shall go back to the yacht.”

And with this Mrs. Wilders walked off.

“Here, sergeant!” cried the general to his orderly, McKay. “I don’t want you; you may be of use to Mrs. Wilders. Go after her.”

“Shall I report myself to her, sir?”

“I don’t advise you, my man. She’d send you about your business double-quick. But you can keep your eye on her, and see she comes to no harm.”

Sergeant McKay saluted and hastened out of the courtyard. Mrs. Wilders had already disappeared down Convent Lane, and was just turning into the main street. McKay followed quickly, keeping her in sight.

It was evident that the best part of Gibraltar had no charms for Mrs. Wilders; she did not want to look into the shop windows, such as they were; nor did she pause to admire the architectural beauties of the Garrison Library or other severely plain masterpieces of our military engineers. Her course was towards the

upper town, and she pressed on with quick, unfaltering steps, as though she knew every inch of the ground.

Ten minutes' sharp walking, sometimes by steep lanes, sometimes up long flights of stone steps, brought her to the upper road leading to the Moorish castle. This was essentially a native quarter; Spanish was the only language heard from the children who swarmed about the doorways, or their slatternly mothers quarreling over their washtubs, or combing out and cleansing, in a manner that will not bear description, their children's hair. Spanish colour prevailed, and Spanish smells.

Still pursuing her way without hesitation, Mrs. Wilders presently turned up another steep alley bearing the historic name of "Red Hot Shot Ramp," and paused opposite a gateway leading into a dirty courtyard. The place was a kind of livery or bait stable patronised by muleteers and gipsy dealers, who brought in horses from Spain.

Picking her steps carefully, Mrs. Wilders entered the stable-yard.

"Benito Villegas?" she asked in fluent Spanish, of the ostler, who stared with open-mouthed surprise at this apparition of a fine lady in such a dirty locality.

"Benito, the commission agent and guide? Yes, señora, he is with his horses inside," replied the ostler, pointing to the stable-door.

"Call him, then!" cried Mrs. Wilders, imperiously. "Think you that I will cross the threshold of your

piggery?" and she waited, stamping her foot impatiently whilst the man did her bidding.

In another minute he came out with Benito Villegas, the man in the brown suit, who had spoken to Mrs. Wilders in the Commercial Square.

"Cypriana," he began at once, in a half-coaxing, half-apologetic tone.

"Silence! Answer my questions, or I will thrash you with your own whip. How dared you intrude yourself upon me to-day?"

"Forgive me! I was so utterly amazed. I thought some bright vision had descended from above, sent, perhaps, by the Holy Virgin"—he crossed himself devoutly—"I could not believe it was you."

"Thanks! I am not an angel from heaven, I know, but let that pass. Answer me! How dared you speak to me to-day?"

"The sight of you awoke old memories; once again I worshipped you—your shadow—the ground on which you trod. I thought of how you once returned my love."

"Miserable cur! I never stooped so low."

"You would have been mine but for that cursed Englishman who came between us, and whom you preferred. What did you gain by listening to him? He lured you from your home——"

"No more! The villain met with his deserts. He is dead—dead these years—and with him all my old life,

That is what brings me here. Attend now, Benito Villegas, to what I say !”

“I am listening,” he answered, cowering before her, and in a tone of mingled fear and passion. It was evident this strange woman exercised an extraordinary influence over him.

“Never again must you presume to recognise me—to address me, anywhere. If you do, take care ! I am a great lady now—the wife of an English general. I have great influence, much power, and can do what I please with such scum as you. I have been with my husband just now to the Convent, the palace of the Governor, and I have but to ask to obtain your immediate expulsion from the Rock. Do not anger or oppose me, man, or beware !”

Benito looked at her with increasing awe.

“Obey my behests, on the other hand, and I will reward you. Ask any favour ! Money ?”—she quickly took out a little purse and handed him a ten-pound note—“here is an earnest of what I will give you. Interest ? Do you want the good-will of the authorities—a snug appointment in the Custom-house, or under the police ? They are yours.”

“I am your slave ; I will do your bidding, and ask nothing in return but your approval.”

“Nothing ! You grow singularly self-denying, Señor Benito.”

“The señora will really help me ?” said Benito, now cringing and obsequious. “One small favour, then. I

am tired of this wandering life. Here to-day in Cadiz ; Ronda, Malaga, to-morrow. At everybody's beck and call—never my own master, not for an hour. I want to settle down.”

“To marry?” inquired Mrs. Wilders, contemptuously. “In your own station? That is better.”

“I have not forgotten you, señora. But the wound was beginning to heal——”

She held up her hand with a menacing gesture.

“I will not deny that I have cast my eyes upon a maiden that pleases me,” Benito confessed. “I have known her from childhood. Her friends approve of my suit, and would accept me ; but what lot can I offer a wife?”

“Well, how is it to be mended?”

“For a small sum—five hundred dollars—I could purchase a share in these stables.”

“You shall have the money at once as a gift.”

“I will promise in return never to trouble you again.”

“I make no conditions ; only I warn you if you ever offend, if you ever presume——”

“I shall fully merit your displeasure.”

“Enough said!” she cut him short. “You know my wishes ; see that they are fulfilled. You shall hear from me again. For the present, good-day.”

She gathered up the skirts of her dress, turned on her heel, and swept out of the place.

In the gateway she ran up against Serjeant McKay,

who had been hovering about the stables from the moment he saw Mrs. Wilders enter the courtyard. He had seen nothing of what passed inside, and as the interview with Benito occupied some time he had grown uneasy. Fearing something had happened to the general's wife, he was on the point of going in to look after her when he met her coming out.

"You have been following me," said Mrs. Wilders, sharply, and jumping with all a woman's quickness at the right conclusion. "Who set you to spy on me?"

"I beg your pardon, madam; I am not a spy," said the young serjeant, formally saluting.

"Don't bandy words with me. Tell me, I insist!"

"The general was afraid something might happen to you. He thought you might need assistance—perhaps lose your way."

She looked at him very keenly as he said these last words, watching whether there was any covert satire in them.

But McKay's face betrayed nothing.

"How long have you been at my heels? How much have you seen?"

"I followed you from the Convent, madam, to this door. I have seen nothing since you went in here."

"I daresay you are wondering what brought me to such a place. A person in whom I take a great interest, an old woman, lives here. I knew her years ago. Psha! why should I condescend to explain? Look here, Mr.

Sergeant"—she took out her purse and produced a sovereign—"take this, and drink my health!"

The sergeant flushed crimson, and drew himself up stiffly, as he said, with another formal salute, "Madam, you mistake!"

"Strange!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "I thought all soldiers liked drink. Well, keep the money; spend it as you like."

"I cannot take it, madam; I am paid by the Queen to do my duty."

"And you will not take a bribe to neglect it? Very fine, truly! General Wilders shall know how well you executed his commands. But there!—I have had enough of this; I wish to return to the yacht. Show me the shortest way back to the water side. Lead on; I will follow you."

Sergeant McKay took a short cut down the steep steps, and soon regained the Waterport. There Mrs. Wilders hailed a native boat, and, without condescending to notice the orderly further, she seated herself in the stern-sheets and was rowed off to the *Arcadia*.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SOUTHERN PEARL.

“MARIQUITA! Ma—ri—kee—tah!”

A woman's voice, shrill and quavering, with an accent of anger that increased each time the summons was repeated.

“What's come of the young vixen?” went on the speaker, addressing her husband, the Tio Pedro, who sat with her behind the counter of a small tobacconist's shop—an ugly beldame, shrunk and shrivelled, with grey elf-locks, sunk cheeks, and parchment complexion, looking ninety, yet little more than half that age. Women ripen early, are soon at their prime, and fade prematurely, under this quickening Southern sun.

The husband was older, yet better preserved, than his wife—a large, stout man, with a fierce face and black,

baleful eyes. All cowered before him except La Zandunga, as they called his wife here in Bombardier Lane. He was at her mercy—a Spaniard resident on the Rock by permit granted to his wife—a native of Gibraltar, and liable to be expelled at any time unless she answered for him.

The shop and stock-in-trade were hers, not his, and she ruled him and the whole place.

“Mariquita!” she called again and again, till at length, overflowing with passion, she rushed from behind the counter into the premises at the back of the shop.

She entered a small but well-lighted room, communicating with a few square feet of garden. At the end was a low fence; beyond this the roadway intervening between the garden and the Line wall, or seaward fortifications.

La Zandunga looked hastily round the room. It contained half-a-dozen small low tables, drawn near the window and open door, and at these sat a posse of girls, busy with deft, nimble fingers, making cigarettes and cigars. These workpeople were under the immediate control of Mariquita, the mistress’s niece. She was popular with them, evidently, for no one would answer when La Zandunga shrieked out an angry inquiry to each.

No answer was needed. There was Mariquita at the end of the garden, gossiping across the fence with young Sergeant McKay.

It was quite an accident, of course. The serjeant,

returning to his quarters from Waterport, had seen Mariquita within, and made her a signal she could not mistake.

“ I knew you would come out,” he said, pleasantly, when she appeared, shy and shrinking, yet with a glad light in her eyes.

“ *Vaya!* what conceit! I was seeking a flower in the garden,” she answered demurely; but her low voice and heightened colour plainly showed that she was ready to come to him whenever he called—to follow him, indeed, all over the world.

She spoke in Spanish, with its high-flown epithets and exaggerated metaphor, a language in which Stanislas McKay, from his natural aptitude and this charming tutorship, had made excellent progress.

“ My life, my jewel, my pearl!” he cried.

A pearl, indeed, incomparable and above price for all who could appreciate the charms and graces of bright blooming girlhood.

Mariquita Hidalgo was still in her teens—a woman full grown, but with the frank, innocent face of a child. A slender figure, tall, but well-rounded and beautifully poised, having the free, elastic movement of her Spanish ancestors, whose women are the best walkers in the world. She had, too, the olive complexion as clear and transparent as wax, the full crimson lips, the magnificent eyes, dark and lustrous, the indices of an ardent temperament capable of the deepest passion, the strongest love, or fiercest hate.

A very gracious figure indeed was this splendid specimen of a handsome race, as she stood there coyly talking to the man of her choice.

The contrast was strongly marked between them. She, with raven hair, dark skin, and soft brown eyes, was a perfect Southern brunette: quick, impatient, impulsive, easily moved. He, fresh-coloured, blue-eyed, with flaxen moustache, stalwart in frame, self-possessed, reserved, almost cold and impassive in demeanour, was as excellent a type of a native of the North.

"What brings you this way, Señor don Sargento, at this time of day?" said Mariquita. "Was it to see me? It was unwise, indiscreet; my aunt ——"

"I have been on duty at Waterport," replied McKay, with a rather ungallant frankness that made Mariquita pout.

"It is plain I am only second in your thoughts. Duty —always duty. Why did not you come last night to the Alameda when the band played?"

"I could not, star of my soul! I was on guard."

"Did I not say so?—duty again! And to-morrow? It is Sunday; you promised to take me to Europa to see the great cave. Is that, too, impossible?"

McKay shook his head laughingly, and said—

"You must not be angry with me, Mariquita; our visit to Europa must be deferred; I am on duty every day. They have made me orderly ——"

"I do not believe you," interrupted the girl, pet-

tishly. "Go about your business! Do not trouble to come here again, Don Stanislas. Benito will take me where I want to go."

"I will break Benito's head whenever I catch him in your company," said the young serjeant, with so much energy that Mariquita was obliged to laugh. "Come, dearest, be more reasonable. It is not my fault, you know; I am never happy away from your side. But, remember, I am a soldier, and must obey the orders I receive."

"I was wrong to love a soldier," said Mariquita, growing sad and serious all at once. "Some day you will get orders to march—to India, Constantinople, Russia—where can any one say?—and I shall never see you more."

This trouble of parting near at hand had already arisen, and half-spoilt McKay's delight at the prospect of sailing for the East.

"Do you think I shall ever forget you? If I go, it will be to win promotion, fame—a better, higher, more honourable position for you to share."

It was at this moment that La Zandunga interrupted the lovers with her resonant, unpleasant voice.

"My aunt! my aunt! Run, Stanislas! do not let her see you, in Heaven's name!"

The serjeant disappeared promptly, but the old virago caught a glimpse of his retreating figure.

"With whom were you gossiping there, good-for-

nothing?" cried La Zandunga, fiercely. "I seemed to catch the colour of his coat. If I thought it was that son of Satan, the serjeant, who is ever philandering and following you about —— Who was it, I say?"

Mariquita would not answer.

"In with you, shameless, idle daughter of pauper parents, who died in my debt, leaving you on my hands! Is it thus that you repay me my bounty—the home I give you—the bread you eat? Go in, jade, and earn it, or I'll put you into the street."

The girl, bending submissively under this storm of invective and bitter reproach, walked slowly towards the house. Her aunt followed, growling fiercely.

"Cursed red-coat!—common, beggarly soldier! How can you, an Hidalgo of the best blue blood, whose ancestors were settled here before the English robbers stole the fortress—before the English?—before the Moors! You, an Hidalgo, to take up with a base-born hireling cut-throat ——"

"No more, aunt!" Mariquita turned on her with flashing eyes. "Call me what you like, you shall not abuse him—my affianced lover—the man to whom I have given my troth!"

"What!" screamed the old crone, now furious with rage. "Do you dare tell me that—to my face? Never, impudent huzzy—never, while I have strength and spirit and power to say you no—shall you wed this hated English mercenary ——"

"I will wed no one else."

“That will we see. Is not your hand promised
_____”

“Not with my consent.”

“—Promised, formally, to Benito Villegas—my husband’s cousin?”

“I have not consented. Never shall I agree. Benito is a villain. I hate and detest him!”

“Tell him so to his face, evil-tongued slut!—tell him if you dare! He is now in the house. That is why I came to fetch you. I saw him approaching.”

“He knows my opinion of him, but if you wish it, aunt, he shall hear it again,” said the young girl, undaunted; and she walked on through the work-room, straight into the little shop.

Benito was seated at the counter, talking confidentially, and in a very low voice, with Tio Pedro.

“Are the bales ready, uncle? In two days from now we can run them through like oil in a tube.”

“Have you settled the terms?”

“On both sides. Here the inspectors were difficult, but I oiled their palms. On the other side the Custom-house officers are my friends. All is straight and easy. The tobacco must be shipped to-morrow ———”

“In the same *falucha*?”

“Yes; for Estepona. Be ready, then, at gunfire
_____”

He stopped suddenly as Mariquita came in.

“Beautiful as a star!” was his greeting; and in a fulsome, familiar tone he went on—“You are like the

sun at noon, my beauty, and burn my heart with your bright eyes."

"Insolent!" retorted Mariquita. "Hold your tongue."

"What! cross-grained and out of humour, sweetest? Come, sit here on my knee and listen, while I whisper some good news."

"Unless you address me more decently, Benito Villegas, I shall not speak to you at all."

"Good news! what then?" put in Tio Pedro, in a coaxing voice.

"My fortune is made. I have found powerful friends here upon the Rock. Within a few days now, through their help, I shall be part owner of la Hermandad Stable; and I can marry when I please."

"Fortunate girl!" said Tio Pedro, turning to Mariquita.

"It does not affect me," replied the girl, with chilling contempt. "Had you the wealth of the Indies, Benito Villegas, and a dukedom to offer, you should never call me yours."

Benito's face grew black as thunder at this unequivocal reply.

"Don't mind her, my son," said the old man. "She has lost her senses: the evil one has bitten her."

"Say, rather, one of those accursed red-coats," interposed his wife, "who has cast a spell over her. I thought I saw him at the garden just now. If I was only certain ——"

“Silly girl, beware!” cried Benito, with bitter meaning. “I know him: hateful, despicable hound! He is only trifling with you. He cares nothing for you; you are not to his taste. What! He, a Northern pale-faced boor, choose you, with your dark skin and black hair! Never! I know better. Only to-day I saw him with the woman he prefers—a fair beauty light-complexioned like himself.”

He had touched the Southern woman’s most sensitive chord. Jealousy flashed from her eyes; a pang of painful doubt shot through her, though she calmly answered—

“It is not true.”

“Ask him yourself. I tell you I saw them together: first near our stables, and then down by Waterport—a splendid woman!”

Waterport! McKay had told her he was returning from that part of the Rock. There was something in it, then. Was he playing her false? No. She would trust him still.

“I do not believe you, Benito. Such suspicions are worthy only of a place in your false, black heart!” and with these words Mariquita rushed away.

CHAPTER IX.

OFF TO THE WARS.

NEXT morning there was much stir and commotion in the South Barracks, where "lay" the Royal Picts—to use a soldier's phrase. The few words let drop by General Wilders, and overheard by Sergeant McKay, had been verified. "The route had come," and the regiment was under orders to join the expeditionary army in the East.

A splendid body, standing eight hundred strong on parade: strong, stalwart fellows, all of them, bronzed and bearded, admirably appointed, perfectly drilled—one of many such magnificent battalions, the flower of the British army, worthily maintaining the reputation of the finest infantry in the world.

Alas! that long years of peace should have rusted

administrative machinery ! That so many of these and other brave men should be sacrificed before the year was out for want of food, fuel, and clothing—the commonest supplies.

There seemed little need to improve a military machine so perfect at all its points. But the fastidious eye of Colonel Blythe, who commanded the Royal Picts, saw many blemishes in his regiment, and he was determined to make the most of the time still intervening before embarkation. Parades were perpetual ; for the inspection of arms and accoutrements, for developing manual dexterity, and efficiency in drill. Still he was not satisfied.

“We must have a new sergeant-major,” said the old martinet to his adjutant in the orderly-room.

The post was vacant for the moment through the promotion of its late holder to be quartermaster.

“Yes, sir ; the sooner the better. The difficulty is to choose.”

“I have been thinking it over, Smallfield, and have decided to promote Hyde. Send for him.”

Colour-sergeant Hyde, erect, self-possessed—a pattern soldier in appearance and propriety—presently marched in and stood respectfully at “attention” before his superior.

“Sergeant Hyde !” said the colonel, abruptly, “I am going to make you a sergeant-major.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Hyde, saluting ; “I had rather not take it.”

“Heavens above!” cried the colonel, fiercely. He was of the old school, and used expletives freely. “You must be an idiot!”

“I am sensible, sir, of the honour you would do me, but ——”

“Nonsense, man! I insist. I must have you.”

“No, sir,” said Hyde, firmly, “I must decline the honour.”

“Was there ever such an extraordinary fellow? Why, man alive! it will reinstate you ——”

“I must beg, sir,” said Hyde, hastily interrupting, and looking with intention towards the adjutant.

“Yes, yes! I understand,” said the colonel. “Leave us, Mr. Smallfield; I wish to speak to Sergeant Hyde alone.”

“You have my secret, Colonel Blythe,” said Hyde, when the adjutant had left the room, “but I have your promise.”

“I was near forgetting it, I confess; but I was so upset, so put out, at your cursed obstinacy. Why will you persist in keeping in the background? Accept this promotion, and you shall have a commission before the year is out.”

“I do not want a commission; I am perfectly happy as I am.”

“Was there ever such a pig-headed fellow? Come, Hyde, be persuaded.” The colonel got up from his seat and walked round to where the sergeant stood, still erect and motionless. “Come, Rupert, old com-

rade, old friend," and he put his hand affectionately on the sergeant's shoulder.

The muscles of the sergeant's face worked visibly.

"It's no use, Blythe; I am dead to the world. I have no desire to rise."

"But it's so aggravating; it puts me in such a hole," said the colonel, striding up and down the office. "You're just the man we want—superior in every way. You would hold your own so well with the other non-commissioned officers. I do wish —— Where am I to find another?"

"I can tell you, if you will listen to my advice."

"Yes? Speak out."

"Young McKay; he would make an excellent sergeant-major."

"I know him—a smart, sensible, intelligent young fellow. But has he ballast—education?"

"He is better born than you or me, colonel. A lad of excellent parts and first-rate education. Bring him on, and he will do you and the regiment credit yet."

The colonel sat down again at his desk, and seemed lost in thought.

"I must ask Smallfield. Call in the adjutant, will you?" he added, in a voice that implied their conventional relations as superior officer and sergeant were resumed.

Half an hour later McKay was standing in Hyde's place, receiving the same offer, but accepting, although diffidently.

"I am not fit for the post, sir," he protested.

"That's my affair. I have selected you for reasons of my own, and the responsibility is mine."

"I will try my best, sir; that is all I can say."

"It's quite enough. Do your best, and you will satisfy me."

"I can't think why he chose me," confided Stanislas to his friend Hyde, later on, in the sergeants' mess.

"Can't you?" replied his friend, drily. "It's a case of hidden merit receiving its right reward."

"I have never thought that the colonel noticed me, or distinguished me from any of the other sergeants," said Stanislas.

"Probably your good qualities were pointed out to him," replied Hyde, still in the same tone. "Or your fine friends and relations have used their influence."

"It is little likely; and, as I tell you, I don't understand it in the least."

"Leave it so. No doubt you will find out some day. In the meantime do justice to your recommendation, whoever gave it. You have got your foot on the ladder now, but no one can help you to climb; that must depend upon your own exertions."

"Yes, but you can help me, Hyde, with your advice, encouragement, support. I am very young to be put up so high, and over men of standing and experience like yourself."

"You will have no more loyal subordinate than me, Sergeant-major McKay. Come to me whenever you

are in trouble or doubt. I will do all I can, you may depend. I like you, boy, and that's enough said."

The old sergeant seized McKay's hand, shook it warmly, and then abruptly quitted the room.

Stanislas was eager to tell this pleasing news of his promotion to Mariquita; but she was the last person to hear it, notwithstanding. McKay entered at once upon his new duties, and they kept him close from morning till night. A good sergeant-major allows himself no leisure. He is the first on parade, the last to leave it. He is perpetually on the move: now inspecting guards and pickets, now superintending drills, while all day long he has his eye upon the conduct of the non-commissioned officers, and the demeanour and dress of the private men.

There was no time to hang about the tobacconist's shop in Bombardier Lane, waiting furtively for a chance of seeing Mariquita alone. They kept their eye upon her, too; and when at last he tore himself away from his new and absorbing duties he paid two or three visits to the place before he could speak to her.

Mariquita received him coldly—distantly.

They were standing, as usual, on each side of the low fence at the end of the garden.

"What's wrong, little star? How have I offended you?"

"I wonder that you trouble to come here at all, Don Stanislas. It's more than a week since I saw you."

“I have been so busy. My new duties : they have made me, you know —— ”

“Throw that bone to some other dog,” interrupted Mariquita, abruptly. “I am to be no longer deceived by your pretended duties. I know the truth : you prefer some other girl.”

“Mariquita !” protested McKay.

“I have heard all. Do not try to deny it. She is tall and fair ; one of your compatriots. You were seen together.”

“Where, pray ? Who has told you this nonsense ?”

“At Waterport. Benito saw you.”

McKay laughed merrily.

“I see it all. Why, you foolish, jealous Mariquita, that was my general’s wife—a great lady. I was attending and following her about like a lackey. I would not dare to lift my eyes to her even if I wished, which is certainly not the case.”

Mariquita was beginning to relent. Her big eyes filled with tears, and she said in a broken voice, as though this quarrel with her lover had pained her greatly—

“Oh, oily-tongued ! if only I could believe you !”

“Why, of course it’s true. Surely you would not let that villain Benito make mischief between us ? But, there ; time is too precious to waste in silly squabbles. I can’t stay long ; I can’t tell when I shall come again.”

“Is your love beginning to cool, Stanislas? If so, we had better part before ——”

“Listen, dearest,” interrupted McKay; “I have good news for you,” and he told her of his unexpected promotion, and of the excellent prospects it held forth.

“I am nearly certain to win a commission before very long. Now that we are going to the war ——”

“The war!” Mariquita’s face turned ghastly white; she put her hand upon her heart, and was on the point of falling to the ground when McKay vaulted lightly over the fence and saved her by putting his arm round her waist.

“Idiot that I was to blurt it out like that, after thinking all the week how best to break the news! Mariquita! Mariquita! speak to me, I implore you!”

But the poor child was too much overcome to reply, and he led her, dazed and half-fainting, to a little seat near the house, where, with soft caresses and endearing words, he sought to restore her to herself.

“The war!” she said, at length. “It has come, then, the terrible news that I have so dreaded. We are to part, and I shall never, never see you again.”

“What nonsense, Mariquita! Be brave! Remember you are to be a soldier’s wife. Be brave, I say.”

“They will kill you! Oh! if they only dared, I would be revenged!”

“Bravo, my pet! that is the proper spirit. You would fight the Russians, wouldn’t you?”

“I would do anything, Stanislas, to help you, to

shield you from harm. Why can't I go with you Who knows! I might save you. I, a weak, helpless girl, would be strong if you were in danger. I am ready, Stanislas, to sacrifice my life for yours."

Greatly touched by the deep devotion displayed by these sweet words, McKay bent his head and kissed her on the lips.

But at this moment the tender scene was abruptly ended by the shrill, strident tones of La Zandunga's voice.

"So I have caught you, shameless girl, philandering again with this rascally red-coat. May he die in a dog-kennel! Here, in my very house! But, I promise you, it is for the last time. *Hola!* Benito! Pedro! help!" and, screaming wildly, the old crone tore Mariquita from McKay's side and dragged her into the house.

The young sergeant, eager to protect his love from ill-usage, would have followed, but he was confronted by Benito, who now stood in the doorway, black and menacing, with a great two-edged Albacete knife in his hand.

"Stand back, miscreant, hated Englishman, or I will stab you to the heart."

Nothing daunted by the threat, McKay advanced boldly on Benito; with one hand he caught his would-be assailant by the throat; with the other the wrist that was lifted to strike. A few seconds more, and Benito had measured his length on the ground, while

his murderous weapon had passed into the possession of McKay.

Having thus disposed of one opponent, McKay met a second, in the person of Tio Pedro, who, slower in his movements, had also come out in answer to his wife's appeal.

"Who are you that dares to intrude here?" asked Pedro, roughly. "I will complain to the town major, and have you punished for this."

"Look to yourself, rather!" replied McKay, hotly. "I stand too high to fear your threats. But you, thief and smuggler, I will bring the police upon you and your accomplice, who has just tried to murder me with his knife."

Tio Pedro turned ghastly pale at the sergeant-major's words. He had evidently no wish for a domiciliary visit, and would have been glad to be well rid of McKay.

"Let him be! Let him be!" he said, attempting to pacify Benito, who, smarting from his recent overthrow, seemed ready to renew the struggle. "Let him be! It is all a mistake. The gentleman has explained his business here, and nothing more need be said."

"Nothing more!" hissed Benito, between his teeth. "Not when he has insulted me—struck me! Nothing more! We shall have to settle accounts together, he and I. Look to yourself Señor Englishman. There is

no bond that does not some day run out ; no debt that is never paid."

McKay disdained to notice these threats, and, after waiting a little longer in the hope of again seeing Mariquita, he left the house.

It was his misfortune, however, not to get speech with her again before his departure. The few short days intervening before embarkation were full of anxiety for him, and incessant, almost wearisome, activity. He had made himself one moment of leisure, and visited Bombardier Lane, but without result. Mariquita was invisible, and McKay was compelled to abandon all hope of bidding his dear one good-bye.

But he was not denied one last look at the girl of his heart. As the regiment, headed by all the bands of the garrison, marched gaily down to the New Mole, where the transport-ship awaited it, an excited throng of spectators lined the way. Colonel Blythe headed his regiment, of course, and close behind him, according to regulation, marched the young sergeant-major, in brave apparel, holding his head high, proudly conscious of his honourable position. The colonel and the sergeant-major were the first men down the New Mole stairs ; and as they passed McKay heard his name uttered with a half-scream.

He looked round hastily, and there saw Mariquita, with white, scared face and streaming eyes.

What could he do ? It was his duty to march on unconscious, insensible to emotion. But this was more

than mortal man could do. He paused, lingering irresolutely, when the colonel noticed his agitation, and quickly guessed the exact state of the case.

“‘The girl I left behind me,’ eh, sergeant-major? Well, fall out for a minute or two, if you like”—and, with this kindly and considerate permission, McKay took Mariquita aside to make his last *adieux*.

“*Adios! vida mia*” [good-bye, my life], he was saying, when the poor girl almost fainted in his arms.

He looked round, greatly perplexed, and happily his eye fell upon Sergeant Hyde.

“Here, Hyde,” he said, “take charge of this dear girl.”

“What! sergeant-major, have you been caught in the toils of one of these bright-eyed damsels? It is well we have got the route. They are dangerous cattle, these women; and, if you let them, will hang like a mill-stone round a soldier’s neck.”

“Pshaw! man, don’t moralise. This girl is my heart’s choice. Please Heaven I may return to console her for present sorrow. But I can’t wait. Help me: I can trust you. See Mariquita safely back to her home, and then join us on board.”

“I shall be taken up as a deserter.”

“Nonsense! I will see to that with the adjutant. We do not sail for two hours at least; you will have plenty of time.”

Sergeant Hyde, although unwillingly, accepted the trust, and thus met Mariquita for the first time.

CHAPTER X.

A GENERAL ACTION..

A LONG low line of coast trending along north and south as far as the eye could reach ; nearest at hand a strip of beach, smooth shingle cast up by the surf of westerly gales ; next, a swelling upland, dotted with grazing cattle, snug homesteads, and stacks of hay and corn ; beyond, a range of low hills, steep-faced and reddish-hued.

The Crimea ! The land of promise ; the great goal to which the thoughts of every man in two vast hosts had been turned for many months past. On the furze-clad common of Chobham camp, on the long voyage out, at Gallipoli, while eating out their hearts at irritating inaction ; on the sweltering, malarious Bulgarian plains, fever-stricken and cholera-cursed ; at Varna,

waiting impatiently, almost hopelessly, for orders to sail, twenty thousand British soldiers of all ranks had longed to look upon this Crimean shore. It was here, so ran the common rumour, that the chief power of the mighty Czar was concentrated; here stood Sebastopol, the famous fortress, the great stronghold and arsenal of Southern Russia; here, at length, the opposing forces would join issue, and the allies, after months of tedious expectation, would find themselves face to face with their foe.

No wonder, then, that hearts beat high as our men gazed eagerly upon the Crimea. The prospect southward was still more calculated to stir emotion. The whole surface of that Eastern sea was covered with the navies of the Western Powers. The long array stretched north and south for many a mile; it extended westward, far back to the distant horizon, and beyond: a countless forest of masts, a jumble of sails and smokestacks, a crowd of fighting-ships and transports, three-deckers, frigates, great troopers, ocean steamers, full-rigged ships—an Armada such as the world had never seen before. A grand display of naval power, a magnificent expedition marshalled with perfect precision, moving by day in well-kept parallel lines; at night, motionless, and studding the sea with a “second heaven of stars.”

Day dawned propitious on the morning of the landing: a bright, and soon fierce, sun rose on a cloudless sky. At a given signal the boats were lowered—a

nearly countless flotilla; the troops went overboard silently and with admirable despatch, and all again, by signal, started in one long perfect line for the shore. Within an hour the boats were beached, the troops sprang eagerly to land, and the invasion was completed without accident, and unopposed.

The Royal Picts, coming straight from Gibraltar, had joined the expedition at Varna without disembarking. The regiment had thus been long on shipboard, but it had lost none of its smartness, and formed up on the beach with as much precision as on the South Barracks parade. It fell into its place at once, upon the right of General Wilders's brigade, and that gallant officer was not long in welcoming it to his command.

Every one was in the highest health and spirits, overflowing with excitement and enthusiasm. At the appearance of their general, the men, greatly to his annoyance, set up a wild, irregular cheer.

"Silence, men, silence! It is most unsoldierlike. Keep your shouting till you charge. Here, Colonel Blythe, we will get rid of a little of this superfluous energy. Advance, in skirmishing order, to the plateau, and hold it. There are Cossacks about, and the landing is not yet completed. But do not advance beyond the plateau. You understand?"

The regiment promptly executed the manœuvre indicated, and gained the rising ground. The view thence inland was more extended, and at no great distance a road crossed, along which was seen a long

line of native carts, toiling painfully, and escorted by a few of the enemy's horse.

"We must have those carts." The speaker was a staff-officer, the quartermaster-general, an eagle-eyed, decisive-speaking, short, slender man, who was riding a splendid charger, which he sat to perfection. "Colonel Blythe! send forward your right company at the double, and capture them."

"My brigadier ordered me not to advance," replied the old colonel, rather stolidly.

"Do as I tell you; I will take the responsibility. But look sharp!"

Already, no doubt under orders from the escort, the drivers were unharnessing their teams, with the idea of making off with the cattle. The skirmishers of the Royal Picts advanced quickly within range, and opened fire—the first shots these upon Russian soil—and some of them took effect. The carts were abandoned, and speedily changed masters.

"We shall want those carts," said old Hyde, abruptly, to his friend the sergeant-major. They had watched this little episode together.

"Yes, I suppose they will come in useful."

"I should think so. Are you aware that this fine force of ours is quite without transport? At least, I have seen none. Do you know what that means?"

"That we shall have to be our own beasts of burden," said McKay, laughing, as he touched his havresack. It was comfortably lined with biscuit and cold

salt pork—three days' rations, and the only food that he or his comrades were likely to get for some time.

"I'm not afraid of roughing it," said the old soldier. "I have done that often enough. We have got our greatcoats and blankets, and I daresay we shan't hurt; but I have seen something of campaigning, and I tell you honestly I don't like the way in which we have started on this job."

"What an inveterate old grumbler you are, Hyde! Besides, what right have you to criticise the general and his plans?"

"We have entered into this business a great deal too lightly, I am quite convinced of that," said Hyde, positively. "There has been no sufficient preparation."

"Nonsense, man! They have been months getting the expedition ready."

"And still it is wanting in the most necessary things. It has to trust to luck for its transport," and the old sergeant pointed with his thumb to the captured carts. "We may, perhaps, get as many more; but, even then, there won't be enough to supply us with food if we go much further inland; we may never see our knapsacks again, or our tents."

"We shan't want them; it won't do us any harm to sleep in the open. Napoleon always said that the bivouac was the finest training for troops."

"You will be glad enough of shelter, sergeant-major, before to-night's out, mark my words! The French

are better off than we are ; they have got everything to their hands—their shelter-tents, knapsacks, and all. They understand campaigning ; I think we have forgotten the art.”

“As if we have anything to learn from the French !” said the self-satisfied young Briton, by way of ending the conversation.

But Sergeant Hyde was right, so far as the need for shelter was concerned. As evening closed in, heavy clouds came up from the sea, and it rained in torrents all night.

A miserable night it was ! The whole army lay exposed to the fury of the elements on the bleak hill-side, drenched to the skin, in pools and watercourses, under saturated blankets, without fuel, or the chance of lighting a bivouac fire. It was the same for all ; the generals of division, high staff-officers, colonels, captains, and private men. The first night on Crimean soil was no bad precursor of the dreadful winter still to come.

Next day the prospect brightened a little. The sun came out and dried damp clothes ; tents were landed, only to be re-embarked when the army commenced its march. This was on the third day after disembarkation, when, with all the pomp and circumstance of a parade movement, the allied generals advanced southward along the coast. They were in search of an enemy which had shown a strange reluctance to come to blows, and had already missed a

splendid opportunity of interfering with the landing.

The place of honour in the order of march was assigned to the English, who were on the left, with that flank unprotected and "in the air"; on their right marched the French; on whose right, again, the Turks; then came the sea. Moving parallel with the land-forces, the allied fleets held undisputed dominion of the waters. A competent critic could detect no brilliant strategy in the operations so far; no astute, carefully calculated plan directed the march. One simple and primitive idea possessed the minds of the allied commanders, and that was to come to close quarters, and fight the Russians wherever they could be found.

There could be only one termination to such a military policy as this when every hour lessened the distance between the opposing forces. At the end of the first day's march, most toilsome and trying to troops still harassed by fell disease, it was plain that the enemy were close at hand. Large bodies of their cavalry hung black and menacing along our front—the advance guards these of a large force in position behind. Any moment might bring on a collision. It was nearly precipitated, and prematurely, by the action of our horse—a small handful of cavalry, led by a fiery impatient soldier, eager, like all under his command, to cross swords with the enemy.

A couple of English cavalry regiments had been

pushed forward to reconnoitre the strength of the Russians. The horsemen rode out in gallant style, but were checked by artillery fire ; a British battery galloped up and replied. Presently the round-shot bounded like cricket balls, but at murderous pace, across the plain. More cavalry went forward on our side, and two whole infantry divisions, in one of which was the Royal Picts, followed in support.

Surely a battle was close at hand. But nothing came of this demonstration. Why, was not quite clear, till Hugo Wilders, who was a captain in the Royal Lancers, came galloping by, and exchanged a few hasty words with the general, his cousin Bill.

“What’s up, Hugo ?” The general was riding just in front of the Royal Picts, and his words were heard by many of the regiment.

“Just fancy ! we were on the point of having a brush with the Cossacks, when Lord Raglan came up and spoiled the fun.”

“Do you know why ?”

“Yes ; I heard him talking to our general—I am galloping, you know, for Lord Cardigan, who was mad to be at them, I can tell you, but he wasn’t allowed.”

“They were far too strong for you ; I could see that myself.”

“That’s what Lord Raglan said. As if any one of us was not good enough for twenty Russians ! But he was particularly anxious, so I heard him say, not to be drawn into an action to-day.”

"No doubt he was right," replied old Wilders. "Only it can't be put off much longer. Unless I am greatly mistaken, to-morrow we shall be at it hammer and tongs."

"I hope I shall be somewhere near!" cried Hugo, gaily. "But where are the Royal Picts? Oh! here! I want to give Anastasius good-day."

He found his younger brother was carrying the regimental colours, and the two young fellows exchanged pleasant greetings. It was quite a little family party, for just behind, in the centre of the line, stood Serjeant-major McKay, the unacknowledged cousin. How many of these four Wilders would be alive next night?

No doubt a battle was imminent. It was more than possible that there would be a night attack, so both armies bivouacked in order of battle, ready to stand up in their places and fight at the first alarm.

But the night passed uneventfully. At daybreak the march was resumed, and the day was still young when the allies came upon what seemed a position of immense strength, occupied in force by the Russian troops.

It was a broad barrier of hills, at right angles with the coast, lying straight athwart our line of march. The hills, highest and steepest near the water's edge, were still difficult in the centre, where the great high road to Sebastopol pierced the position by a deep defile; beyond the road, slopes more gentle ended on the outer

flank in the tall buttresslike Kourgané Hill. All along the front ran a rapid river, the Alma, in a deep channel. Villages nestled on its banks—one near the sea, one midway, one on the extreme right; and all about the low ground rich vegetation flourished, in garden, vineyard, and copse.

These were the heights of the Alma—historic ground, hallowed by many memories of grim contest, vain prowess, glorious deeds, fell carnage, and hideous death.

“We are in for it now, my boy,” whispered Sergeant Hyde, who was one of the colour-party, and stood in the centre of the column, near McKay.

“What is it?” asked the young sergeant-major eagerly. “A fight?”

“More than that—a general action. In another hour or two we shall be engaged hotly along the whole line. Some of us will lose the number of our mess before the day is done.”

The Royal Picts formed part of the second division, under the command of Sir de Lacy Evans, a fine old soldier, who had seen service for half a century. This division was on the right of the English army. On the left of Sir de Lacy Evans was the Light Division, beyond that the Highlanders and Guards. The Third Division was in reserve behind the Second, the Fourth far in the rear, still near the sea-shore.

The march had hitherto been in columns, a dispo-

sition that lent itself readily to deployment into line—the traditional formation, peculiar to the British arms, and the inevitable prelude to an attack.

The order now given to form line was, therefore, promptly recognised as the signal for the approaching struggle. It was rendered the more necessary by the galling fire opened upon our troops by the enemy's batteries, which crowned every point of vantage on the hills in front.

Grandly, and with admirable precision, the three leading divisions of the British army formed themselves into the historic "Thin Red Line," renowned in the annals of European warfare, from Blenheim to Waterloo.

This beautiful line, so slender, yet so imposing in its simple, unsupported strength, was more than two miles long, and faced the right half of the Russian position. As the divisions stood, the Guards and Highlanders confronted the Kourgané Hill, with its greater and lesser redoubts, armed with heavy guns and held by dense columns of the enemy. Next them was the Light Division, facing the vineyards and hamlets to the left of the great high road; before them were other earth-works, manned by a no less formidable garrison and artillery. The Second Division lay across the high road, opposite the village of Bourliouk, high above which was an eighteen-gun battery and great masses of Russian troops.

General Wilders's brigade was on the extreme right

of the British front ; its right regiment was the Royal Picts, the very centre this of the battle-field, midway between the sea and the far left ; and here the allied generals had their last meeting before the combat commenced.

A single figure, sitting straight and soldier-like in his saddle, with white hair blached in the service of his country—a service fraught with the perils and penalties of war, as the empty sleeve bore witness—this single figure rode a little in advance of the British staff. It was Fitzroy Somerset, now Lord Raglan, the close comrade and trusted friend of the Iron Duke, by whose side he had ridden in every action in Spain. His face was passive and serene. Contentment shone in every feature. His martial spirit was stirred by the sights and sounds of battle, once so familiar to him, but now for forty years unheard. But the calm demeanour, the quiet voice, the steady, unflinching gaze, all indicating a noble unconsciousness of danger, were those of the chance rider in Rotten Row, not of a great commander carrying his own life and that of thousands in his hand.

The man who came to meet him was a soldier too, but of a different type, cast in another mould—a Frenchman, emotional, easily excited, quick in gesture, rapid-speaking, with a restless, fiery eye. St. Arnaud, too, had long tried the fortunes of war. His was an intrepid, eager spirit, but he was torn and convulsed with the tortures of a mortal sickness, and at

times, even at this triumphant hour, his face was drawn and pale with inward agony.

They were near enough, these supreme chiefs, for their conversation, or parts of it, to be heard around. But they spoke in French, and few but McKay understood the purport of all they said.

“I am ready to advance at any moment,” said Lord Raglan. “I am only waiting for the development of your attack.”

“Bosquet started an hour ago, but he has a tremendous climb up those cliffs.”

It was General Bosquet’s business to assault the left of the Russian position, strong in natural obstacles, and almost inaccessible to troops.

At this moment an aide-de-camp ventured to ride forward to his general’s side, and said—

“Do you hear that firing, my lord? I think the French on the right are warmly engaged.”

“Are they?” replied Lord Raglan, doubtfully; “I can’t catch any return fire.”

“In any case,” observed St. Arnaud, quickly, “it is time to lend him a hand. The Prince Napoleon and Canrobert shall now advance.”

“The sooner the better,” said Lord Raglan, simply; “I must wait till their attack is developed before I can move.”

“You shall not wait long, my friend.”

The next instant the French mounted messengers were scouring the plain. St. Arnaud paused a moment,

then, gathering up his reins, he put spurs to his horse and galloped away, saluted as he went by a loud and hearty cheer.

The sound must have gladdened the heart of the gallant Frenchman, for he promptly reined in his horse, and, rising in his stirrups, responded with a loud "Hurrah for Old England!" given in ringing tones, and in excellent English. Then, still followed by cheers, he went on his way.

It is but poor fun waiting while others begin a great game—poor fun and dangerous too, as the English line presently realised, while they looked impatiently for the order to advance. The Russian gunners had got their range, and were already plying them with shot and shell. At the first gun, fired evidently at the British staff, Lord Raglan, as cool and self-possessed as ever, turned to General Wilders, and said, briefly—

"Your men had better lie down."

"May I not cast loose cartridges first, my lord?" said the old soldier, anxious to prepare for the serious business of the day.

"With all my heart! But be quick; they must not stand up here to be shot at for nothing." Then Lord Raglan himself, erect and fearless, resumed his observation of the advancing French columns.

"Dear, dear! how slow they are!" cried the eager voice of Airey, the quartermaster-general.

"Look! they are checked!" said another; "they can't stomach the climb."

“ They have a tough job before them,” said a third.
“ It will try them hard.”

That the French were in difficulties was evident, for now an aide-de-camp came galloping from Bosquet with the grave news that the division was in danger. He was followed by another prominent person on St. Arnaud's staff, bringing an earnest entreaty that the English should not delay their advance. A fierce storm of iron hail, moreover, made inaction more and more intolerable.

The time was come ! Lord Raglan turned and spoke five words to General Airey. The next minute staff-officers were galloping to each division with the glad tidings : “ The line will advance ! ”

All along it men rose from the ground with a resolute air, fell into their ranks, and then the “ Thin Red Line,” having a front of two miles and a depth of two men, marched grandly to the fight.

It is with the doings of the Second Division, or more exactly with Wilders's brigade of that body, that we are now principally concerned.

The task before it was arduous and full of danger, demanding devoted courage and unflinching hearts.

At the moment of the advance the village immediately in front of them burst into flames—a fierce conflagration, lighted by the retreating foe. The dense columns of smoke hid the batteries beyond, and magnified the dangers of attack ; the fierce fire narrowed the path of progress and squeezed in the advancing line.

On the left, the Light Division, moving forward with equal determination, still further limited the ground for action ; and, thus straitened and compressed, the division marched upon a small front swept by a converging fire. So cruelly hampered was the Second Division, so stinted in breathing space, that a portion of General Wilders's command was shut out of the advancing line, and circled round the right of the burning village.

In this way the Royal Picts got divided ; part went with the right of the brigade, still under the personal direction of its brigadier ; part stuck to the main body, and followed on with the general tide of advance. With the latter went the head-quarters of the regiment ; its colonel, colours, and sergeant-major.

They were travelling into the very jaws of death, as it seemed. Progress was slow, and hindered by many vexatious obstacles—low walls and brushwood, ruined cottages, and many dangerous pitfalls on the vine-clad slopes—obstacles that forbade all speed, yet gave no cover from the pitiless fire that searched every corner, and mowed men down like grass.

Casualties were terribly numerous ; yet still the line, undaunted but with sadly decreasing numbers, kept on its perilous way. Presently, having won through the broken ground, a new barrier interposed. They came upon the rapid river, rushing between steep banks, and deep enough to drown all who risked the fords. But there was no pause or hesitation ; the men plunged bravely into the water, and, battling with

the torrent, crossed, not without difficulty and serious loss.

Colonel Blythe, with the Royal Picts, was one of the first men over. He rode a snow-white charger, which he put bravely at the steep bank, and clambered up with the coolness of one who rode well to hounds. He gained the top, and served as a rallying-point for the shattered remnant of his regiment, which there quickly re-formed with as much coolness and fastidious nicety as on a barrack-square at home.

They were under shelter here, and, pausing to recover breath, could look round and watch how the fight fared towards the left.

At this moment the Light Division had effected a lodgment in the great redoubt; but, even while they gazed, the Russian reserves were forcing back the too-presumptuous few. Behind, a portion of the brigade of Guards was advancing to reinforce the wavering line and renew the attack. Beyond, further on the left, in an *échelon*, advanced three lines, one behind the other, the Highlanders and their stout leader, Sir Colin Campbell.

It was only a passing glimpse, however, that our friends obtained. Their leader knew that the fortunes of the day were still in doubt, and that every man must throw his weight into the scale if victory was to be assured.

The line was again ordered to advance. The slope was steeper now; they were scaling, really, the heights

themselves. Just above them yawned the mouths of the heavy guns that had been dealing such havoc while they were painfully threading the intricacies of the low ground.

“We must drive them out of that!” shouted old Blythe. “That battery has been playing the mischief with us all along. Now, lads, shoulder to shoulder; reserve your fire till we are at close quarters, then give them the cold steel!”

The Royal Picts set up a ringing cheer in cordial response to their chieftain’s call. The cheer passed quickly along the line, and all again pressed forward in hot haste, with set teeth, and bayonets at the charge.

A withering fire of small arms met the Royal Picts as they approached the battery; it was followed by the deafening roar of artillery; and the murderous fire of the guns, great and small, nearly annihilated the gallant band. Small wonder, then, that the survivors halted irresolute, half disposed to turn back. Colonel Blythe was down. They missed his encouraging voice; his noble figure was no more visible, while his fine old white charger, riderless, his flanks streaming with gore, was galloping madly down the hill. Many more officers were laid low by this murderous discharge; amongst others, Anastasius Wilders had fallen, severely wounded, and his blood had spurted out in a great pool upon the colour he carried.

All this happened in less time than it takes to

describe. It was one of those moments of dire emergency, of great opportunity—suddenly arising, gone as swiftly beyond recall, unless snatched up and dealt with by a prompt, audacious spirit.

Young McKay saw it with the unerring instinct of a true soldier. He acted instantaneously, and with bold decision.

Stooping over his prostrate cousin, who lay entangled amidst the folds of the now crimson silk, he gently detached the colour, and, raising it aloft, cried—

“Come on, Royal Picts!”

The men knew his voice, and, weakened, though not dispirited, they gallantly responded to the appeal. Once more the line pressed forward. The short space between them and the earthwork was quickly traversed. Before the artillery could deal out a second salvo, the Royal Picts were over the parapet and in the thick of the Russians, bayoneting them as they stood at their guns.

The battery was won.

“Well done, sergeant-major—right well done! I saw it all. It shan’t be forgotten if we two come out of this alive!”

The speaker was Colonel Blythe, who, happily, although dismounted by the shot that wounded his horse, had so far escaped unhurt.

“But this is no time for compliments; we must look to ourselves. The enemy is still in great strength. They are bringing up the reserves.”

Above the battery a second line of columns loomed large and menacing. Was this gallant handful of Englishmen, which had so courageously gained a footing in the enemy's works, to bear the brunt of a fresh conflict with a new and perfectly fresh foe? The situation was critical. To advance would be madness; retreat was not to be thought of; yet it might cost them their lives to maintain the ground they held.

While they paused in anxious debate, there came sounds of firing from their right, aimed evidently at the Russians in front of them, for the shot and shell ploughed through the ranks of the foe.

"What guns can those be?" asked Colonel Blythe. "They are catching them nicely in flank."

"French, sir, I expect," replied McKay. "That is the side of their attack."

"Those are English guns, I feel sure. I know the crack they make."

He was right; the guns belonged to Turner's battery, brought up at the most opportune juncture by Lord Raglan's express commands. To understand their appearance, and the important part they played in deciding the battle on this portion of the field, we must follow the other wing of the Royal Picts, which, when separated from the rest of the brigade, passed round the right flank of the village.

Hyde was with this detachment, and, as he afterwards told McKay, he saw Lord Raglan and his staff ride forward, alone and unprotected, across the river,

straight into the enemy's position. In the river two of his staff were shot down, and the commander-in-chief promptly realised the meaning of this fire.

“ Ah ! ” he cried. “ If they can enfilade us here, we can certainly enfilade them on the rising ground above. Bring up some guns ! ”

It was not easy travelling for artillery, but Turner was a man whom no difficulties dismayed. Within an hour a couple of his guns had been dragged up the steep gradient, were unlimbered, and served by the officers themselves.

It was the fire of this artillery that relieved the Royal Picts of their most serious apprehensions. It tided them over the last critical phase of the hotly-contested action, and completed the discomfiture of the enemy on this side.

Matters had gone no less prosperously on the left. The renewed attack of the Light Division, supported by the Guards, had ended in the capture of the great redoubt ; while Sir Colin Campbell, a veteran warrior, at the head of his “ bare-legged savages,” as they were christened by their affrighted foe, had made himself master of the Kourgané Hill.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

THE Battle of the Alma was won! Three short hours had sufficed to finish it, and by four o'clock the enemy was in full retreat. It was a flight rather than a retreat—a headlong, ignominious stampede, in which the fugitives cast aside their arms, accoutrements, knapsacks, everything that could hinder them as they ran. Pursuit, if promptly and vigorously carried out, would assuredly have cost them dear. But the allies were short of cavalry; the British, greatly weakened by their losses in this hard-fought field, could spare no fresh troops to follow; the French, although they had scarcely suffered, and had a large force available, would do nothing more; St. Arnaud declared pursuit impossible, and this, the first fatal error in the campaign,

allowed the beaten general to draw off his shattered battalions.

But, if the allied leaders rejected the more abiding and substantial fruits of victory, they did not disdain the intoxicating but empty glories of an ovation from their troops. The generals were everywhere received with loud acclaims.

Deafening cheers greeted Lord Raglan as he rode slowly down the line. The cry was taken up by battalion after battalion, and went echoing along—the splendid, hearty applause of men who were glorifying their own achievements as well.

There was joy on the face of every man who had come out of the fight unscathed—the keen satisfaction of success, gloriously but hardly earned. Warm greetings were interchanged by all who met and talked together. Thus Lord Raglan and Sir Colin Campbell, both Peninsular veterans, shook hands in memory of comradeship on earlier fields. Few indeed had thus fought together before ; but none were less cordial in their expressions of thankfulness and cordial good-will. They told each other of their adventures in the day—its episodes, perils, narrow, hair-breadth escapes ! they inquired eagerly for friends ; and then, as they learnt gradually the whole terrible truth, the awful price at which victory had been secured, moments that had been radiant grew overcast, and short-lived gladness fled.

“Next to a battle lost, nothing is so dreadful as a battle won,” said Wellington, at the end, too, of his

most triumphant day. The slaughter is a sad set-off against the glory; groans of anguish are the converse of exulting cheers. The field of conquest was stained with the life's blood of thousands. The dead lay all around; some on their backs, calmly sleeping as though death had inflicted no pangs; the bodies of others were writhed and twisted with the excruciating agony of their last hour. The wounded in every stage of suffering strewed the ground, mutilated by round shot and shell, shattered by grape, cut and slashed and stabbed by bayonet and sword.

Their cries, the loud shriek of acute pain, the long-drawn moan of the dying, the piercing appeal of those conscious, but unable to move, filled every echo, and one of the first and most pressing duties for all who could be spared was to afford help and succour.

Now the incompleteness of the subsidiary services of the English army became more strikingly apparent. It possessed no carefully organised, well-appointed ambulance trains, no minutely perfect field-hospitals, easily set up and ready to work at a moment's notice; medicines were wanting; there was little or no chloroform; the only surgical instruments were those the surgeons carried, while these indispensable assistants were by no means too numerous, and already worked off their legs.

Parties were organised by every regiment, with stretchers and water-bottles, to go over the field, to carry back the wounded to the coast, and afford what help they could. The Royal Picts, like the rest, hasten

to send assistance to their stricken comrades. The bandsmen, who had taken no part in the action, were detailed for the duty, and the sergeant-major, at his own earnest request, was put in charge.

As they were on the point of marching off, General Wilders rode up. He had been separated, it will be remembered, from part of his brigade, and had still but a vague idea of how it had fared in the fight.

“I saw nothing of you, colonel, during the action. Worse luck I went with the wrong lot, on the right of the village.”

“It is well some of the regiment escaped what we went through,” said Colonel Blythe, sadly. “My left wing was nearly cut to pieces. I was never under such a fire.”

“How many have you lost, do you suppose?”

“We are now mustering the regiment: a sorrowful business enough. Seven officers are missing.”

“What are their names?”

“Popham, Smart, Drybergh, Arrowsmith ——”

“Anastasius—my young cousin—is he safe?” hastily interrupted the general.

Colonel Blythe shook his head.

“I missed him half way up the hill; he was carrying the regimental colour, but when we got into the battery it was in the sergeant-major’s hands. I wish to bring his—the sergeant-major’s—conduct especially before your notice, general.”

“The sergeant-major’s? Very good. But if he

took the colour he must know what happened to Anastasius. Call him, will you ? ”

Sergeant-major McKay came up and saluted.

“Mr. Wilders, sir,” he told the general, “was wounded as we were breasting the slope.”

“You saw him go down ? Where was he hit ? ”

“I hadn’t time to wait, sir.”

“I should think not,” interrupted Colonel Blythe ; “but for him, general, we should never have carried the battery. I was dismounted, the men were checked, and just at the right moment the sergeant-major led them on.”

“Bravely done, my lad ! You shall hear of this again ; I will make a special report to the commander of the forces. But there, that will keep. We must see after this poor boy.”

“I was just sending off a party for the purpose,” said the colonel.

“That’s right. You have some idea, I suppose”—this was to McKay—“of the place where Mr. Wilders fell ? ”

“Certainly, sir. I think I can easily find it.”

“Very well ; show us the way. And you, Powys”—this was to the aide-de-camp—“ride over to the Royal Lancers and tell Hugo Wilders what has happened.”

Then the little band of Good Samaritans set out upon its painful mission. The autumn evening was already closing in ; the night air blew chill across the desolate plain ; already numbers of men were busy amongst the

wounded, assuaging their thirst from water-bottles, covering the prostrate forms with blankets, and lending the surgeons a helping hand.

Half an hour brought the searchers of the Royal Picts to where young Anastasius Wilders lay. McKay was the first to find him, and he raised a shout of recognition as he ran forward to the wounded officer. Unslinging his water-bottle, he put it to his cousin's lips ; but young Wilders waved the precious liquid aside, saying, although in a feeble voice—

“Thank you ; but I can wait. Give it to that poor chap over there ; he is far worse hit than I am.”

It was a private of the regiment, whose breast a bullet had pierced, and whose tortures seemed terrible.

But now the rest of the party came up. General Wilders dismounted, flask in hand, and the wounded lad was rewarded for his self-denial.

A surgeon, too, had arrived, and he was anxiously questioned as to the nature of young Wilders's wound.

The right leg had been shattered below the knee by a round shot ; the wound had bled profusely, but the poor lad managed to stanch it with his shirt.

“Can you save it ?” whispered the general.

“Impossible !” replied the surgeon, in the same tone. “We must amputate above the knee at once,” and he turned up his sleeves and gave instructions to an assistant to get ready the instruments.

The operation, performed without chloroform, and borne with heroic fortitude, was over when Hugo

Wilders rode up to the spot. Anastasius recognised his brother, and answered his anxious, sorrowful greeting with a faint smile.

“What is to be done with him now?” asked the general.

“We must get him on board ship—to-night, if possible; but how?”

“We will carry him every inch of the way,” said one of the bandsmen of the Royal Picts. Young Wilders was idolised by the men.

“It is three miles to the sea-shore: a long journey.”

“They can march in two reliefs, four carrying, four resting,” said McKay.

“You must be very careful,” said the surgeon.

“Never fear! We will carry him as easy as a baby in its cot,” replied one of the soldiers.

“Yes, yes! you can trust us,” added McKay.

“Are you going with them?” asked the general.

“I should like to do so, sir.”

“And of course I shall go too,” added Captain Wilders; and the procession, thus formed, wended its way to the shore.

It was midnight before McKay and the stretcher-party were relieved of their precious charge, and when they had seen the wounded officer embarked in one of the ship's boats, accompanied by his brother, they laid down where they were to rest and await the daylight.

Soon after dawn they were again on the move

making once more for the heights above the river, where they had left their regiment. Once more, too, they traversed the battle-field, with its ghastly sights and distressing sounds. It was still covered with the bodies of the dead and dying, their numbers greatly increased, for many of the wounded had succumbed to the tortures of the night. The figures of ministering comrades still moved to and fro, and men of all ranks were busily engaged in the good work.

There were others whose action was more open to question—camp-followers and sutlers, dropped from no one knew where, who lurked in secret hiding-places, and issued forth, when the coast seemed clear, to follow their loathsome trade of robbing the dead.

McKay's little party, as they trudged along, suddenly put up one of these evil birds of prey almost at their feet. The man rose and ran for his life, pursued by the maledictions of the Royal Picts.

"Stop him! Stop him!" they cried, and the fugitive was met and turned at every point. But he doubled like a hare, and had nearly made his escape when he fell almost into the arms of Sergeant Hyde.

"Stick to him!" cried McKay. "We will hand him over to the provost-marshal, who will give him a short shrift."

A fierce struggle ensued between the fugitive and his captor, the result of which seemed uncertain; but the former suddenly broke loose, and again took to

his heels. He made towards the French lines, and disappeared amongst the clefts of the steep rocks.

When McKay joined Hyde, he said to him, rather angrily—

“Why did you let the fellow go?”

“I did my best, but he was like an eel. I had far rather have kept him. I have wanted the scoundrel these dozen years.”

“You know him, then?”

“Yes,” replied Hyde, sternly. “I know him well, but I thought that he was dead. It is better so; we have a long account to settle, and the day of reckoning will certainly come.”

Thus ended the first collision between the opposing armies: the first great conflict between European troops since Waterloo. The credit gained by the victors, whose prowess echoed through the civilised world, was greater, perhaps, than the results achieved. The Alma, as we shall see, might have paved the way, under more skilful leadership, to a prompt and glorious termination of the war. But, if it exercised no sufficient influence upon the larger interests of the campaign, the battle greatly affected the prospects of the principal character in this story.

Sergeant-major McKay was presently informed that, in recognition of the signal bravery he had displayed at the storming of the Causeway battery, his name had been submitted to the Queen for an ensign's commission in the Royal Picts.

CHAPTER XII.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

AFTER their victory at the Alma the allies tarried long on the ground they had gained. There were many excuses, but no sound reasons, for thus wasting precious moments that would never return. It was alleged that more troops had to be landed; that the removal of the sick and wounded to ship-board consumed much time; that further progress must be postponed until the safest method of approaching Sebastopol had been discussed in many and lengthy councils of war.

Yet at this moment the great fortress and arsenal lay at their mercy. They had but to put out their hands to capture it. Menschikoff's beaten army was long in rallying, and when at last it resumed the

coherence of a fighting force its leader withdrew it altogether from Sebastopol, thus abandoning the fortress to its fate.

Its chief fortifications now were on the northern side, that nearest the allies, and within a short day's march. Only one redoubt—the so-called Star Fort—was of any formidable strength, and as this was close to the seashore it was exposed to the bombardment of the fleets. But the Star Fort lay before the French, supposing that the original order of march was preserved; and the French, exaggerating its powers of resistance, could not be persuaded to face the risks of assault. The fact was, St. Arnaud lay dying, and for the moment all vigour was gone from the conduct of the French arms.

Little doubt exists to-day that the northern fortifications could not have resisted a determined attack. That it was not attempted was another grave error; to be followed by yet another, when, after a hazardous detour—the well-known “flank march”—the allies transferred themselves to the southern side of Sebastopol, and again neglected a palpable opportunity. The north side might be fairly well protected; the south was practically defenceless; a few weak earth-works, incomplete, and without artillery, were its only bulwarks; its only garrison were a few militia battalions and some hastily-formed regiments of sailors from the now sunken Russian ships of war.

It must undoubtedly have fallen by a *coup de main*.

But generals hesitated and differed, bolder spirits were overruled, undue weight was given to the too-cautious counsels of scientific soldiers, and it was decided to sit down before and slowly besiege the place.

The chance on which the allies turned their backs was quickly seized by the enemy. One of the brightest pages in modern military annals is that which records how the genius and indomitable energy of one man improvised a resolute and protracted defence; and none have done fuller justice to Todleben than the foes he so long and gallantly kept at bay.

The allies now entered, almost with light hearts, upon a siege that was to last for eleven weary months and prove the source of unnumbered woes. In a comfortable leisurely fashion they proceeded to break ground, to open trenches, and approach the enemy's still unfinished works by parallel and sap. The siege-train—the British War Minister's fatal gift, encouraging as it did the policy of delay—was landed, as were vast supplies of ammunition and warlike stores. Tents, too, were brought up to the front, and the allied encampment soon covered the plateau from the Tchernaya to the sea. The troops soon settled down in their new quarters, and the heights before Sebastopol grew gradually a hive of military industry, instinct with warlike sounds, teeming with soldier life.

The Royal Picts found themselves posted on the uplands above the Tchernaya valley, very near the extreme right of the British front, and here they took

their share of the duties that now fell upon the army, furnishing fatigue-parties to dig at the trenches, and armed parties to cover them as they worked, and pickets by day and night to watch the movements of the enemy.

Since McKay's official recommendation for a commission, he had been entrusted with duties above his position as sergeant-major. The adjutant had been badly wounded at the Alma, and it was generally understood that when promoted McKay would succeed him. Meanwhile he was entrusted with various special missions appertaining to the rank he soon expected to receive.

One of these was his despatch to Balaclava to make inquiries for the knapsacks of the regiment. They had been left on board ship, and the transport had been expected daily in Balaclava harbour. The men were sadly in 'want of a change of clothes, and neither these nor the little odds and ends that go to make up a soldier's comfort were available until they got their packs. McKay was directed to take a small party with him to land the much-needed baggage and have it conveyed by hook or crook to the front.

He left the camp late in the afternoon, and, striking the great Woronzoff Road just where it pierced the Fediukine Heights, descended it until he reached the Balaclava plain. A few miles beyond, the little town itself was visible, or, more exactly, the forest of masts that already crowded its little land-locked port.

Here, on the right of the communications between the English army and its base, a long range of redoubts had been thrown up and garrisoned by the Turks. These crowned the summit of a range of low hillocks, and, in marching to his point, McKay paused on the level ground between two hills. The Turks on sentry gave him a "Bono Johnny!" as he passed, by way of greeting; but they were far too lazy and too sleepy to do more.

It was evident they kept a poor look-out, and doubtful strangers were as free to pass as British friends. Just upon the rear of No. 3 Redoubt McKay and his men came upon a fellow crouching low amongst the broken ground. McKay would have passed by without remark, but his first look at the stranger, who wore no uniform and seemed a harmless, unoffending Tartar peasant, was followed by a second and keener gaze. He thought he recognised the man; he certainly had seen his face before. Directing his men to seize him, he made a longer and closer inspection, and found that it was the ruffian whom they had surprised and chased on the heights above the Alma the morning after the battle.

"He is up to no good," said McKay. "We must take him along with us."

But where? The job they were on was a definite one; not the capture of chance prisoners, which would certainly delay them on the road.

Still, remembering the last occasion on which he had

seen this man, and the mysterious remarks that Hyde had let fall concerning him, McKay felt sure the fellow was not what he seemed. This Tartar dress must be a disguise : how could Hyde have made the acquaintance years before of a Tartar peasant in the Crimea ?

Certainly the man must go with them, and therefore, placing him securely in the midst of his party, McKay marched on. If nothing better offered, he would hand his prisoner over to the Commandant of Balaclava on arrival there.

But as they trudged along, and, leaving the cavalry-encampment on their right, approached the ground occupied by the Highland brigade, they encountered its general—McKay had seen him at the Alma—riding out, accompanied by his staff.

The quick eye of Sir Colin Campbell promptly detected the prisoner. He rode up at once to the party, and said, in a sharp, angry tone—

“What are you doing with that peasant? Don’t you know that the orders are positive against molesting the inhabitants? Who is in command of this party?”

McKay stood forth and saluted.

“You? A sergeant-major? Of the Royal Picts, too! You ought to know better. Let the man go!”

“I beg your pardon, Sir Colin,” began McKay; “but ——”

“Don’t argue with me, sir; do as I tell you. I have a great mind to put you in arrest.”

McKay still stood in an attitude of mute but firm protest.

“What does the fellow mean? Ask him, Shadwell. I suppose he must have some reason, or he would not defy a general officer like this.”

Captain Shadwell, one of Sir Colin’s staff, took McKay aside, and, questioning him, learnt all the particulars of the capture. McKay told him, too, what had occurred at the Alma.

“The fellow must be a spy,” said Sir Colin, abruptly, when the whole of the facts were repeated to him. “We must cross-question him. I wonder what language he speaks.”

The general himself tried him with French; but the prisoner shook his head stupidly. Shadwell followed with German, but with like result.

“I’ll go bail he knows both, and English too, probably. He ought to be tried in Russian now: that’s the language of the country. He is undoubtedly an impostor if he can’t speak that. I wish we could try him in Russian. If he failed, the provost-marshal should hang him on the nearest post.”

This conversation passed in the full hearing of McKay, and when Sir Colin stopped the sergeant-major stepped forward, again saluted, and said modestly—

“I can speak Russian, sir.”

“You? An English soldier? In the ranks, too? Extraordinary! How on earth—but that will keep.

We will put this fellow through his facings at once. Ask him his name, where he comes from, and all about him. Tell him he must answer; that his silence will be taken as a proof he is not what he pretends. No real Tartar peasant could fail to understand Russian."

"Who and what are you?" asked McKay. And this first question was answered by the prisoner with an alacrity that indicated his comprehension of every word that had been said. He evidently wished to save his neck.

"My name is Michaelis Baidarjee. Baidar is my home; but I have been driven out by the Cossacks to-day."

It was a lie, no doubt. Hyde had recognised him as a very different person.

"Ask him what brings him into our lines?" said Sir Colin, when this answer had been duly interpreted.

"I came to give valuable information to the Lords of the Universe," he replied. "The Russians are on the move."

"Ha!" Sir Colin's interest was aroused. "Go on; make him speak out. Say he shall go free if he tells us truly all he knows."

"Where are the Russians moving?" asked McKay.

"This way"—the man pointed back beyond Tchor-gorum. "They are collecting over yonder, many, many thousands, and are marching this way."

"Do you mean that they intend to attack us?"

"I think so. Why else do they come? Yesterday

there were none. All last night they were marching ; to-morrow, at dawn, they will be here."

"Who commands them?"

"Liprandi. I saw him, and they told me his name."

"This is most important," said Sir Colin ; "we must know more. Find out, sergeant-major, whether he can go back safely."

"Back within the Russian lines?"

"Exactly. He might go and return with the latest news."

"You would never see the fellow again, Sir Colin. He is only humbugging us ——"

"Put the question as I direct you," interrupted the general, abruptly. "What we want is information ; it must be got by any means."

"Yes, I will go," the prisoner promised, joining his hands with a gesture as if taking an oath ; "and I would return this very night ; you shall have the exact numbers ; shall know the road they are coming, when to expect them—all."

"Let him loose, then," said the general ; "but warn him, if he plays us false, that he had better not fall into our clutches again."

"You may trust him not to do that, sir," said McKay, rather discontented at seeing his prisoner so easily set free.

The general ignored the remark, but he was evidently displeased at its tone, for he now turned sharply on McKay, saying—

“As regards you—how comes it you speak Russian?”

“I was born in Moscow.”

“Of Russian parents?”

“My father was a Pole by birth, but by extraction a Scotchman.”

“What is your name?”

“McKay—Stanislas Anastasius Wilders McKay.”

“Ah! Stanislas; I understand that. But how is it you were christened Wilders? And Anastasius, too—that is a family name, I think. Are you related to Lord Essendine?—a Wilders, in fact?”

“Yes, sir, by my mother’s side.”

“And yet you have taken the Queen’s shilling! Strange! But it is no business of mine. Young scapegrace, I suppose ——”

“My character is as good as——” “yours,” McKay would have said, but his reverence for the general’s rank restrained him. “I enlisted because I could not enter the British army and be a soldier in any other way.”

“With your friends’—your relatives’—approval?”

“With my mother’s, certainly; and of those nearest me.”

“Do you know General Wilders—here in the Crimea, I mean?”

“My regiment is in his brigade.”

“Yes, yes! I am aware of that. But have you made yourself known to him, I mean?”

The young sergeant-major knew that his gallantry at the Alma had won him his general's approval, but he was too modest to refer to that episode.

"I have never claimed the relationship, sir," he answered, simply, but with proud reticence; "it would not have beseemed my position."

"Your sentiments do you credit, young man. That will do; you can continue your march. Good-day!"

They parted; McKay and his men went on to Balaclava, the general towards the Second Division camp.

"Curious meeting, that, Shadwell," said Sir Colin. "If I come across Wilders I shall tell him the story. He might like to do his young relative—a smart soldier evidently, or he would not be a sergeant-major so early—a good turn."

CHAPTER XIII.

“NOT WAR!”

THE spy, whatever his nationality, and however questionable his antecedents, was right in the intelligence he had communicated. A large Russian force was even then on the march from Tchorgorum, pointing straight for the Balaclava plain. The enemy had regained heart; emboldened by the constant influx of reinforcements, and the inactivity of the allies, he had grown audacious, and was ready to try a vigorous offensive. A blow well aimed at our communications and delivered with intention might drive us back on our ships, perhaps into the sea.

McKay had passed the night at Balaclava. The transport with the knapsacks was not yet in port, and he was loth to return to camp empty-handed. But next morning, soon after daylight, news came back to

the little sea side town that another battle was imminent, on the plains outside.

The handful of Royal Picts were promptly mustered by their young commander, and marched in the direction of the firing, which was already heard, hot and heavy, towards the east.

As they left Balaclava, they encountered a crowd of Turkish soldiers in full flight, making madly for the haven, and shouting, “Ship! ship!” as they ran. McKay, gathering from this stampede that already some serious conflict had begun, hurried forward to where he found a line of red-coats drawn up behind a narrow ridge which barred the approaches to Balaclava.

This was the famous 93rd, in its now historic formation—another “Thin Red Line,” which received undaunted, and only two deep, the onslaught of the Russian horse.

The regiment was under the personal control of its brigadier, stout old Sir Colin, who, with his staff, stood a little withdrawn, but closely observing all that passed. He recognised McKay, and called out abruptly—

“Halloa! where have you dropped from?”

“I heard the firing, sir, met the Turks retreating, and brought up my party to reinforce and act as might be ordered.”

“It was well done, man. But enough; get yourselves up into line there on the left, and take the word from the colonel of the 93rd.”

"We have our work cut out for us, sir," said one of his staff to Sir Colin.

"We have, but we'll do it. This gorge must be held to the death. You understand that, Colonel Ainslie—to the death?"

"You can trust us, Sir Colin."

"I think so; but I'll say just one word to the men," and, while the enemy's cavalry were still some distance off, the general rode slowly down the line, speaking his last solemn injunction—

"Remember, men, there is no retreat from here. You must die where you stand."

One and the same answer rose readily to every lip—

"Ay! ay! Sir Colin; we'll do that!" shouted the gallant Scots.*

Their veteran leader's head was clear; his temper cool and self-possessed. He held these brave hearts in hand like the rider of a high-couraged horse, and knew well when to restrain, when to let go.

As the Russians approached, a few eager spirits would have rushed forward from their ranks to encounter their foe in the open plain; but Sir Colin's trumpet voice checked them with a fierce—

"Ninety-third! Ninety-third! None of that eagerness!"

And then a minute or two later came the signal for

* Historical. *cf.* Kinglake's "Crimea," v. 80.

the whole line to advance. The Highlanders, and those with them, swiftly mounted to the crest of the ridge, and met the charging cavalry with a withering volley. A second followed. The enemy had no stomach for more; reining in their horses, they wheeled round and fell back as they had come.

This, however, was only the beginning of the action. Heavy columns of the enemy now appeared in sight, cavalry and infantry, with numerous artillery crowning the eastern hills. A portion occupied the redoubts abandoned by the Turks, and the attitude of the Russians was so menacing that it seemed unlikely we could stay their onward progress.

For the moment no troops could be interposed but the British cavalry—the two brigades, Light and Heavy—which had their encampment in the plain, and had been under arms, commanded by Lord Lucan, since daybreak.

“We must have up the First and Fourth Divisions,” Lord Raglan had said, when he arrived on the battle-field soon after eight in the morning; at first he had treated the news of the Russian advance lightly. Many such moves had been reported on previous days, and all had ended in nothing. “Let the Duke of Cambridge and Sir George Cathcart have their orders at once. We must trust to the cavalry till the infantry come up. Tell Scarlett to support the Turks.”

But the Turks had given way before General Scarlett could stiffen their courage, and as his brigade, that of

heavy cavalry, trotted towards the redoubts, other and more stirring work offered itself. The head of a great column of Russian horse, three thousand sabres, came over the crest of the hill and invited attack.

Scarlett saw his opportunity, and, with true soldierly promptitude, seized it. He wheeled his squadrons into line and charged. Three went against the front, five against the right flank, one against the left.

The intrepid "Heavies," outnumbered fivefold, dashed forward at a hand gallop, and were soon swallowed up in the solid mass. But it could not digest the terrible dose. Just eight minutes more and the Russian column wavered, broke, and turned.

It was a fine feat of arms, richly meriting its meed of praise.

"Well done! well done!" was the message that came direct from Lord Raglan, on the hills above.

"Greys! Gallant Greys!" cried Sir Colin Campbell, galloping up to one of the regiments that had made this charge. "I am sixty-one years old, but if I were young I should be proud to be in your ranks!"

"What luck those Heavies have!" shouted another and a bitterly discontented spectator of their prowess.

It was Lord Cardigan who, at the head of the Light Brigade, sat still in his saddle, looking on.

Yet it was no one's fault but his own that he had not been also engaged. His men were within striking distance; they were bound, moreover, by the clearest

canons of the military art to throw their weight upon the exposed flank of the discomfited foe.

But Lord Cardigan had strangely—obstinately, indeed—misunderstood his orders, and, although chafing angrily at inaction, conceived that it was his bounden but distasteful duty to halt where he was.

“Why don’t he let us loose at them? Was there ever such a chance?” muttered Hugo Wilders, audibly, and within earshot of his chief. He was again riding as extra aide to Lord Cardigan, who turned fiercely on the speaker.

“How dare you, sir, question my conduct? You shall answer for your insubordination ——”

“Let me implore you, my lord, to advance,” said another voice, entreating earnestly, that of Captain Morris, a cavalry officer who knew war well, and who was, for the moment, in command of a magnificent regiment of Lancers.

“It is not your business to give me advice,” replied the general, haughtily. “Wait till I ask for it.”

“But, my lord, see! the Russians are reeling from the charge of the Heavies. Now if ever ——”

“Enough, Captain Morris. My orders were to defend this position; and here I shall stay. I was told to attack nothing unless they came within reach. The enemy has not yet done that.”

So the chance of annihilating the Russian cavalry was lost, and the Light Brigade thought that its chances of

distinction were also gone for the day. Alas ! the hour of its trial was very close at hand.

Lord Raglan had waited anxiously for the infantry divisions he had ordered up. The first, under the Duke of Cambridge, was now close at hand, and the fourth, led by Sir George Cathcart, had arrived at a point whence it might easily have reached out a hand to recover the redoubts. But Cathcart's advance was so leisurely that Lord Raglan feared he would be too late to prevent the Russians from carrying off the guns they had captured from the Turks. The enemy, it must be understood, were showing manifest signs of despondency : their shattered cavalry had gone rapidly to the rear, and their infantry had halted irresolute, inclined also to retreat.

"This is the moment to strike them," decided Lord Raglan. "They are evidently losing heart, and we ought to get back the redoubts easily. I will send the cavalry. They are almost on the spot, and at any rate can get quickly over the ground. Ride, sir," to an aide-de-camp, "and tell Lord Lucan to recover the heights. Tell him he will have infantry, two whole divisions, in support."

They watched the aide-de-camp deliver his message ; but still Lord Lucan, who was in supreme command of the cavalry, made no move.

"What is he at ?" cried Lord Raglan, testily. "He is very long about it."

“ There is no time to lose, my lord,” interposed the quartermaster-general, who had been intently watching the redoubts with his field-glasses. “ I can see them bringing teams of horses into the redoubts. They evidently mean to carry off our guns.”

The necessity for action was more than ever urgent and immediate.

“ Lord Lucan must be made to move. Here, Airey ! send him a peremptory order in writing.”

The quartermaster-general produced pencil and paper from his sabretash, and wrote as follows :—

“ Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, and try to prevent the enemy from carrying away the guns. Immediate.”

“ That will do,” said Lord Raglan. “ Let your own aide-de-camp carry the order. He is a cavalry officer, and can explain, if required.”

It was Nolan, the enthusiastic, ardent, devoted cavalry soldier, heart and soul, and overflowing now with joy at his mission, and the chances of distinction it offered the cavalry. A fine, fearless horseman, he galloped at a breakneck pace down the steep and rocky sides of the plateau, and quickly reached Lord Lucan’s side.

The general read his orders, with lips compressed and lowering brow.

“ You come straight from Lord Raglan ? But, surely, you are General Airey’s aide-de-camp ? ”

“Lord Raglan himself entrusted me with the message.”

“I can’t believe it. It is utterly impracticable: for any useful purpose. Quite unequal, quite inadequate, to the risks and frightful loss it must entail.”

The impetuous aide-de-camp showed visible signs of impatience. While the general debated and discussed his orders, instead of executing them with instant, unquestioning despatch, a great opportunity was flitting quickly by.

“Lord Raglan’s orders are”—Nolan spoke with an irritation that was disrespectful, almost insubordinate—“his lordship’s orders are that the cavalry should attack immediately.”

“Attack, sir!” replied Lord Lucan, petulantly; “attack what? What guns?”

“There, my lord, is your enemy,” replied Nolan, with an excited wave of his arm; “there are your guns!”

The exact meaning of the gesture no man survived to tell, but its direction was unhappily towards a formidable Russian battery which closed the gorge of the north valley, and not to the heights crowned by the captured redoubts.

Lord Lucan, heated by the irritating language of his junior officer, must have lost his power of discrimination, for although his first instructions clearly indicated the guns in the redoubt, and his second, brought by

Nolan, obviously referred to the same guns, the cavalry general was misled—by his own rage, or Nolan’s sweeping gesture, who shall say?—misled into a terrible error.

He conceived it to be his duty to send a portion of his cavalry against a formidable battery of Russian guns, well posted as they were, and already sweeping the valley with a well-directed, murderous fire.

Of the two cavalry brigades, the Light was still fresh and untouched by the events of the day. The Heavy Brigade, as we have seen, had already done splendid service in routing the Russian cavalry. The turn of the Light Brigade had come, although, unhappily, the task entrusted to it was hopeless, foredoomed to failure from the first.

It stood close by, proudly impatient, its brigadier, Lord Cardigan, at its head.

To him the divisional general imparted Lord Raglan’s order.

“You are to advance, Lord Cardigan, along the valley, and attack the Russians at the far end,” was the order he gave.

“Certainly, sir,” replied Lord Cardigan, without hesitation. “But allow me to point out to you that the Russians have a battery in the valley in our front, and batteries and riflemen on each flank.”

“I can’t help that,” said Lord Lucan; “Lord Raglan will have it so. You have no choice but to obey.”

Lord Cardigan saluted with his sword; then, rising in his stirrups, he turned to his men, and cried aloud in a full, firm voice—

“The brigade will advance!”—to certain death, he might have added, for he knew it, although he never quailed. But, settling himself in his saddle, as though starting on a promising run with hounds, and not on a journey from which there was no return, he said, with splendid resignation, as he prepared to lead the charge—

“Here goes for the last of the Brudenells!”*

All this had passed in a few minutes, and then three lines of dauntless horsemen—in the first line, Dragoons and Lancers; in the second, Hussars; in the third, Hussars and more Dragoons—galloped down the north valley on their perilous and mistaken errand.

They were already going at full speed, when a single horseman, with uplifted arm and excited gesture, as though addressing the brigade, crossed their front. It was Nolan, who thus seemed to be braving the anger of Lord Cardigan by interfering with the leadership of his men.

What brought Nolan there? The inference is only fair and reasonable that at the very outset he had recognised the misinterpretation of Lord Raglan's orders, and was seeking to change the direction of the charging horsemen, diverting them from the Russian battery towards the redoubts, their proper goal.

* The family name of the Earls of Cardigan was Brudenell.

Fate decreed that this last chance of correcting the terrible error should be denied to the Light Brigade. A Russian shell struck Nolan full in the chest, and “tore a way to his heart.” By his untimely death the doom of the light cavalry was sealed.

As the devoted band galloped forward to destruction, all who observed them stood horror-stricken at the amazing folly of this mad, mistaken charge.

“Great heavens!” cried Lord Raglan. “Why, they will be destroyed! Go down, Calthorpe, and you, Burghersh, and find out who is responsible for this frightful mistake!”

“Magnificent!” was the verdict of Bosquet, a friendly but experienced French critic. “But it is not war.”

Not war—murder, rather, and sudden death.

The ceaseless fire of the guns they faced wrought fearful havoc in the ranks of the horsemen as they galloped on. Still the survivors went forward, unappalled; but it was with sadly diminished numbers that they reached the object of their attack. The few that got to the guns did splendid service with their swords. The gunners were cut down as they stood, and for the moment the battery was ours. But it was impossible to hold it; the Light Brigade had almost ceased to exist. Presently its shattered remnants felt slowly back, covered by the Heavies against the pursuit of the once more audacious Russian cavalry.

Barely half an hour had sufficed for the annihilation of nearly six hundred soldiers, the flower of the British

Light Horse. The northern valley was like a shambles, strewn with the dead and dying, while all about galloped riderless horses, and dismounted troopers seeking to regain their lines on foot. Quite half of the whole force had been struck down, among the rest Hugo Wilders, whose forehead a grape-shot had pierced.

The muster of regiments after such a fight was but a mournful ceremony. When at length the now decimated line was re-formed, the horror of the action was plainly seen.

"It was a mad-brained trick," said Lord Cardigan, who had marvellously escaped—"a monstrous blunder, but it was no fault of mine."

"Never mind, my lord;!" cried many gallant spirits. "We are ready to charge again!"

"No, no, men," replied Lord Cardigan, hastily; "you have done enough."

It was at this moment that Lord Raglan rode up, and angrily called Lord Cardigan to account.

"What did you mean, sir, by attacking guns in front with cavalry, contrary to the usages of war?"

"You must not blame me, my lord," replied Lord Cardigan. "I only obeyed the orders of my superior officer," and he pointed to Lord Lucan, whom Lord Raglan then addressed with the severe reproof—

"You have sacrificed the Light Brigade, Lord Lucan. You should have used more discretion."

"I never approved of the charge," protested Lord Lucan.

“ Then you should not have allowed it to be made.”

The battle of Balaclava was practically over, and, although they had suffered no reverse, its results were decidedly disadvantageous to the allies. The massacre of the Light Brigade encouraged the Russian general to advance again ; his columns once more crossed the Woronzoff road, and re-occupied the redoubts in force. The immediate result was the narrowing of the communications between the front and the base. The use of a great length of this Woronzoff road was forbidden, and the British were restricted to the insufficient tracks through Kadikoi. A principal cause this of the difficulties of supply during the dread winter now close at hand.

Another lesser result of the Russian advance was that McKay and his men that afternoon were unable to rejoin their regiment by the road they had travelled the day before. He returned to camp by a long and circuitous route, through Kadikoi, instead of by the direct Woronzoff road.

It was late in the day, therefore, when he was once more at his headquarters. He had much to tell of his strange adventures on these two eventful days, and the colonel, who had at once sent for him, kept him in close colloquy, plying him with questions about the battle, for more than an hour. It was not till he had heard everything that Colonel Blythe handed the sergeant-major a bundle of letters and papers, arrived that morning by the English mail.

“There is good news for you, McKay,” said he. “I was so interested in your description that I had forgotten to tell you. Let me congratulate you; your name is in the *Gazette*,” and the Colonel, taking McKay’s hand, shook it warmly.

McKay carried off his precious bundle to his tent, and, first untying the newspaper, hunted out the *Gazette*.

There it was—

“The Royal Picts—Sergeant-Major Stanislas Anastasius Wilders McKay to be Ensign, *vice* Arrowsmith, killed in action.”

They had lost no time; the reward had followed quickly upon the gallant deed that deserved it. Barely a month had elapsed since the Alma, yet already he was an officer, bearing the Queen’s commission, which he had won with his own right arm.

His letters were from home—from his darling mother, who, in simple, loving language, poured forth her joy and pride.

“My dearest, bravest boy,” she said, “how nobly you have justified the choice you made; you were right, and we were wrong in opposing your earnest wish to follow in your poor father’s footsteps—would that he had lived to see this day! It was his spirit that moved you when, in spite of us all, of your uncles’ protests and my tears, you persisted in your resolve to enlist. They said you had disgraced yourself and us. It was cruel of them; but now they are the first to come round. I have heard from both your uncles;

they are, of course, delighted, and beg me to give you their heartiest good wishes. Uncle Ralph said perhaps he would write himself ; but he is so overwhelmed with work at the Munitions Office he may not have time. Uncle Barto you will, perhaps, see out in the Crimea ; he has got command of the *Burlington Castle*, one of the steamers chartered from his Company, and is going at once to Balaclava.

“ Oh, my sweet son be careful of yourself ! ” went on the fond mother, her deep anxiety welling forth. “ You are my only, only joy. I pray God hourly that He may spare your precious life. May He have you in His safe keeping ! ”

The reading of these pleasant letters occupied Stanislas till nightfall. Then, utterly wearied, but with a thankful, contented heart, he threw himself upon the ground, and slept till morning.

When he issued forth from his tent it was to receive the cordial congratulations of his brother officers. Sergeant Hyde came up, too, a little doubtfully, but McKay seized his hand, saying—

“ You do not grudge me my good luck, I hope, old friend ? ”

“ I, sir ? ”—the address was formal, but the tone was full of heartfelt emotion. “ You have no heartier well-wisher than Colour-Sergeant Hyde. Our relative positions have changed —— ”

“ Nothing can change them, or me, Hyde. You

have always been my best and staunchest friend. It is to your advice and teachings that I owe all this."

"Go on as you have begun, my boy; the road is open before you. Who knows? That field-marshal's bâton may have been in your pack after all!"

While they still talked a message was brought to McKay from General Wilders; the brigadier wished to see him at once.

"How is this, Mr. McKay?" said the general. "So you pretend to be a cousin of mine? Sir Colin Campbell has told me of his meeting with you, and now I find your name in full in the *Gazette*."

"It is no pretence, sir," replied Stanislas, with dignity.

"What! You call yourself a Wilders! By what right?"

"My mother is first cousin to the present Lord Essendine."

"Through whom?"

"Her father, Anastasius Wilders."

"I know—my father's brother. Then you belong to the elder branch. But I never heard that he married."

"He married Priscilla Coxon in 1805."

"Privately?"

"I believe not. But it was much against his father's wish, and his wife was never recognised by the family. His widow—you know my grandfather died early—

married a second time, and thus increased the breach between the families.”

“It’s a strange story. I don’t know what to think of it. These statements of yours — can they be substantiated?”

“Most certainly, sir, by the fullest proof. Besides, the present Lord Essendine is quite aware of my existence, and has acknowledged my relationship.

“Never openly: you must admit that.”

“No, we were simple people; not grand enough, I suppose, for his lordship. At any rate, we were too proud to be patronised, and preferred to go our own way.”

“I acknowledge you, Mr. McKay, without hesitation, and am proud to own so gallant a young man as my relative. You have indeed maintained the soldierly reputation of our family. Shake hands!”

“You are very kind, sir; I hope to continue to deserve your good opinion,” and McKay rose to take his leave.

“Stay, Cousin McKay, I have more to say to you. What is this Sir Colin tells me about your speaking Russian?”

Stanislas explained.

“It may prove extremely useful; we have not too many interpreters in the army. I shall write to headquarters and report your qualifications. Do you speak any other languages?”

“French, Spanish, and a little Turkish.”

“By Jove! you ought to be on the staff; they want such men as you. Can you sit on a horse?”

“I have ridden bare-backed many a dozen miles across the moors at home.”

“Faith! I will take you myself. I want an extra aide-de-camp, and my cousin shall have the preference. I will send to Colonel Blythe at once; be ready to join me. But how about your kit? You will want horses, uniform, and—— Forgive me, my young cousin: but how are you off for cash? You must let me be your banker.”

McKay shook his head, gratefully.

“Thank you, sir; but I have been supplied from home. One of my uncles—my mother’s half-brother—is well-to-do, and he sent me a remittance on hearing of my promotion.”

“Well, well, as you please; but mind you come to me if you want anything. I shall expect you to take up your duties to-morrow.” They were interrupted by all the bugles in the brigade sounding the assembly. “What is it? The alarm?”

“I can hear file-firing, sir, from the front.”

“An attack, evidently. Hurry back to your camp; the regiment will be turned out by the time you get there!”

As McKay left the general’s tent he met Captain Powys.

“The outposts have been driven in on Shell Hill and the enemy is advancing in force,” said the aide-de-

camp. “We shall have another battle, I expect. It is our turn to-day.”

This was Colonel Fedeoroff's forlorn hope against our extreme right: the sequel to Balaclava, the prelude of Inkerman—a sharp fight while it lasted, but promptly repulsed by our men.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GOLDEN HORN.

SINCE the English and French armies had established themselves in the Crimea and the magnitude of their undertaking grew more and more apparent, they had found their true base of operations at Constantinople. Here were collected vast masses of supplies and stores, waiting to be forwarded to the front; here the reinforcements—horse, foot, and guns—paused ere they joined their respective armies; here hospitals, extensive, but still ill-organised and incomplete, received the sick and wounded sent back from the Crimea; here also lingered, crowding the tortuous streets of Mussulman Stamboul and filling to overflowing the French-like suburb of Pera, a strange medley of people, a motley crew of various faiths and many nationalities, polyglot in tongue and curiously different in attire, drawn

together by such various motives as duty, mere curiosity, self-interest, and greed. Jews, infidels, and Turks were met at every corner: the first engaged in every occupation that could help them to make money, from touting at the bazaars to undertaking large contracts and selling bottled beer; the second, representatives going or coming from the forces now devoted to upholding the Crescent; the third, mostly apathetic, self-indulgent, corpulent old Mussulmans riding in state, accompanied by their pipe-bearers, or sitting half-asleep in coffee-houses or at the doors of their shops. Now and again a bevy of Turkish ladies glided by: mere peripatetic bundles of white linen, closely-veiled and yellow-slippered; or a Greek in his white petticoat, fierce in aspect and armed to the teeth; or an Armenian merchant, Arnauts, Bashi-Bazouks, French Spahis, the Bedouins of the desert, but half-disguised as civilised troops, while occasionally there appeared, amidst the heterogeneous throng, the plain suit of grey dittoes worn by the travelling Englishman, or the more or less simple female costumes that hailed from London or Paris.

Misseri's hotel did a roaring trade. It was crowded from roof-tree to cellar. Rooms cost a fabulous price. Mrs. Wilders managed to be very comfortably lodged there notwithstanding.

She still lingered in Constantinople. Her anxiety for her husband forbade her to leave the East, although she told her friends it was misery for her to be

separated from her infant boy. She might have had a passage home in a dozen different steamers returning empty, all of them in search of fresh freights of men or material; or there was Lord Lydstone's yacht still lying in the Golden Horn and ready to take her anywhere if only she said the word. But that, of course, was out of the question, as she had laughingly told her husband's cousin more than once when he had placed the *Arcadia* at her disposal.

They met sometimes, but never on board the yacht, for that would have outraged Mrs. Wilders's nice sense of propriety. It was generally at Scutari, where poor young Anastasius Wilders lay hovering between life and death, for Mrs. Wilders, with cousinly kindness, came frequently to the wounded lad's bedside.

She was bound for the other side of the Bosphorus as she went downstairs one fine morning towards the end of October, dressed, as usual, to perfection.

A man met her as she crossed the threshold, a man dressed like, and with the air of, an Englishman—a pale-faced, sandy-haired man, with white eyebrows, rather prominent cheek-bones, and a retreating chin.

“Good morning, my dear madam.” He spoke with just the faintest accent, betraying that English was not his native tongue. “Like a good Sister, going to the hospital again?”

Mrs. Wilders bowed, and, with heightened colour, sought to pass hastily on.

“What! not one word for so old a friend?” He spoke now in French—perfect Parisian French.

“I wish you would not address me in public: you know you promised me that,” replied Mrs. Wilders, in a tone of much vexation, tinged with the respect that is born of fear.

“Forgive me, madam, if I have presumed. But I thought you would wish to hear the news.”

“News! Of what?”

“Another battle, a fierce, terrible fight, in which, thank Heaven! the English have suffered defeat!” He spoke with an exultation that proved him to be a traitor, or no Englishman.

“A battle? The English defeated?”

“Yes; thank Heaven, beaten, massacred, disastrously defeated! It is only the beginning of the end. We shall hear soon of far worse. The Czar is gathering together all his strength; what can the puny forces of the allies do against him? They will be outnumbered thousands to one—annihilated before they can escape to their ships.”

“Pshaw! What do I care! Whether they are driven away from the Crimea, or remain, is much the same to me. But, after all, this is mere talk; you can’t terrify me by such vapourings.”

“I tell you I know this for a fact. The Russian forces in the Crimea have been continually reinforced for weeks past. I know it; I saw them. I was there,

in their midst, not many days ago. Besides, I am behind the scenes, deep in their counsels. Rely upon it, the allies are in imminent danger. You will hear soon of another and far greater fight, after which it will be all over with your friends !”

“ Well, well ! my friends, as you call them, must look to themselves. Still, this is mere talk of what may be. Tell me what has actually occurred. There has been a battle : are many slain ? General Wilders—is he safe ? ”

“ You need have no apprehensions for your dear husband, madam ; his command was not engaged. The chief brunt of the fight fell upon the cavalry, who were cut to pieces.”

“ What of young Wilders ? Hugo Wilders, I mean—Lord Lydstone’s brother.”

“ His name is returned amongst the killed. It will be a blow for the noble house of Essendine, and not the only one.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ The other brother, young Anastasius, whom you are going to see, cannot survive, I hear.”

“ Poor young fellows ! ” said Mrs. Wilders, with a well-assumed show of feeling.

“ You pity them ? I honour your sentiments, madam ; but, nevertheless, they can be spared, especially by you.”

“ What do you mean ? ” she asked, quickly.

“I mean that after they are gone only one obstacle intervenes between you and all the Essendine wealth. If Lord Lydstone were out of the way, the title and its possession would come, perhaps, to your husband, certainly to your son.”

“Silence! Do not put thoughts into my head. You must be the very fiend, I think.”

“I know you, Cyprienne, and every move of your mind. We are such old friends, you see,” he said, with a sneering, cynical smile. “And now, as before, I offer you my help.”

“Devil! Do not tempt me!”

He laughed—a cold, cruel, truculent laugh.

“I know you, I repeat, and am ready to serve you as before. Come, or send, if you want me. I am living here in this hotel; Mr. Hobson they call me—Mr. Joseph Hobson, of London. My number is 73. Shall I hear from you?”

“No, no! I will not listen to you. Let me go!” And Mrs. Wilders, breaking away from him, hurried down the street.

It was not a long walk to the waterside. There she took a caique, or local boat, with two rowers in red fezzes, and was conveyed across the Bosphorus to the Asiatic side.

Landing at Scutari, Mrs. Wilders went straight to the great palace, which was now a hospital, and treading its long passages with the facility of one who had

travelled the road before, she presently found herself in a spacious, lofty chamber filled with truckle-beds, and converted now into a hospital-ward.

"How is he?" she asked, going up at once to a sergeant who acted as superintendent and head nurse.

"Mr. Wilders, ma'am?" replied the sergeant, with a shake of the head.

"No improvement?"

"Far worse, ma'am, poor young chap! He died this morning, soon after daylight."

"And my lord—was his brother present?"

"Lord Lydstone watched with him through the night, and was here by the bedside when he died."

"Where is he now? Lord Lydstone, I mean."

"He went back on board his yacht, ma'am, I think. He said he should like a little sleep. But he is to be here again this afternoon, for the funeral."

"So soon?"

"Oh, yes! ma'am. It must take place at once, the doctors say."

Mrs. Wilders left the hospital, hesitating greatly what she should do. She would have liked to see and speak with Lydstone, but she had enough good feeling not to intrude by following him on board the yacht.

Then she resolved to attend the funeral too. It would show her sympathy, and Lord Lydstone would be bound to notice her.

He did see her, and came up after the ceremony to shake her hand.

“I am so sorry for you,” she began.

“It is too terrible!” he exclaimed. “Both in one day.”

He had heard of Balaclava, then.

“But I can’t talk about it to-day. I will call on you to-morrow, if I may, in the morning. I am going back to England almost at once.”

He came next day, and she received him in her little sitting-room at Misseri’s.

“You know how I feel for you,” she said, giving him both her hands, her fine eyes full of tears. “They were such splendid young fellows, too. It is so sad—so very sad.”

“I am very grateful for your sympathy. But we will not talk about them, please,” interrupted Lord Lydstone.

“You have my warmest and most affectionate sympathy. Is there anything I can do to console you, to prove to you how deeply, how sincerely, I feel for you?”

Her voice faltered, and she seemed on the point of breaking down.

“What news have you of the general?” asked Lord Lydstone, rather abruptly, as though to change the conversation.

“Good enough. He is all right,” said Mrs. Wilders,

dismissing inquiry for her husband in these few brusque words.

“ I can’t think of him just now,” she went on. “ It is you and your great sorrow that fill all my heart. Oh, Lydstone ! dear Lord Lydstone, the pity of it ! ”

This tender commiseration was very captivating. But the low, sweet voice seemed to have lost its charm.

“ I think I told you yesterday, Mrs. Wilders, that I intended to return to England,” said Lord Lydstone, in a cold, hard voice.

“ Yes ; when do you start ? ”

“ To-morrow, I think. Have you any commands ? ”

“ You do not offer me a passage home ? ”

“ Well, you see, I am travelling post haste,” he answered. “ I shall only go in the yacht as far as Trieste, and then on overland. I fear that would not suit you ? ”

“ I should be perfectly satisfied ” — she was not to be put off — “ with any route, provided I go with you.”

“ You are very kind, Mrs. Wilders,” he said, more stiffly, but visibly embarrassed. “ I think, however, that as I shall travel day and night I had better —— ”

“ In other words, you decline the pleasure of my company,” she said, in a voice of much pique.

It was very plain that she had no longer any influence over him.

“But why are you in such a desperate hurry, Lord Lydstone?” she went on.

“I have had letters, urging me to hurry home. My father and mother are most anxious to see me; and now, after what has happened, it is right that I should be at their side.”

“You are a good son, Lord Lydstone,” she said, but there was the slightest sneer concealed beneath her simple words.

“I have not been what I ought, but now that I am the only one left I feel that I must defer to my dear parents’ wishes in every respect.” He said this with marked emphasis.

“They have views for you, I presume?” Mrs. Wilders asked, catching quickly at his meaning.

“My mother has always wanted me to settle down in life, and my father has urged me ——”

“To marry. I understand. It is time, they think, for you to have sown your wild oats?”

“Precisely. I have liked my freedom, I confess. Now there are the strongest reasons why I should marry.”

“To secure the succession, I suppose.”

“We have surely a right to look to that!” said Lord Lydstone, rather haughtily.

“Oh! of course. Every one is bound to look after his own. And the young lady—has she been found?”

Lord Lydstone coloured at this point-blank question.

"I have been long paying my addresses to Lady Grizel Banquo," he said.

"Oh! she is your choice? I have often seen her and you together."

"We have been friends almost from childhood; and it seems quite natural ——"

"That you should tie yourself for life to a red-headed, raw-boned Scotch girl."

"To an English lady of my own rank in life," interrupted Lord Lydstone, sternly, "who will make me an honest, faithful helpmate, as I have every reason to hope and believe."

"You are just cut out for domestic felicity, Lord Lydstone. I can see you a staid, sober English peer, a pattern of respectability, the stay and support of your country, obeyed with reverent devotion by a fond wife, bringing up a large family ——"

"As young people should be brought up, I hope—the girls as modest, God-fearing maidens; the boys to behave like gentlemen, and to tell the truth."

"A very admirable system of education, I'm sure. By-and-bye we shall see how nearly you have achieved your aim."

She was disappointed and bitterly angry, feeling that he had rebuffed and flouted her.

"We part as friends, I hope?" said Lord Lydstone, rising to go.

"Oh, certainly! why not?" she answered carelessly.

“I trust you will continue to get good news from Cousin Bill.”

“And I that you will have a speedy voyage home. It would be provoking to be delayed when bound on such a mission.”

Then they parted, never to meet again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST OF LORD LYDSTONE.

THE mixed population of Constantinople in these busy, stirring times was ripe for any great surprise. It was much moved and excited by a startling bit of news that spread very rapidly next day.

An atrocious murder had been committed on the Stamboul side, near the Bridge of Boats.

Certainly, murders were not unknown in this hive of complex life, harbouring as it did the very scum and refuse of European rascality. But the victims were mostly vile, nameless vagabonds, low Greeks, Maltese suttlers, Italian sailors, or one or other of the hybrid mongrel ruffians following in the track of our armies, any of whom might be sent to their long account without being greatly missed.

It was otherwise now : the murdered man was a prominent personage, an Englishman of high rank, a rich and powerful representative of a great people. No wonder that Constantinople was agitated and disturbed.

On this occasion Lord Lydstone was the murdered man.

He had been found at daybreak by the Turkish patrol, lying in a doorway just where he had fallen dead, stabbed to the heart.

The body was taken to the nearest guard, and inquiries were instituted. A card-case found on the body led to identification, and a report made to the British Embassy set in motion the law and justice of the peace.

Nothing satisfactory or conclusive was brought to light. No one could account for his lordship's presence in that, the lowest quarter of the city ; the only clue to his movements was furnished by his steward and body-servant on board the yacht.

The valet came on shore and gave his evidence before the informal court, which was dealing with the case at the British Embassy, presided over by the *attachés*.

“ When did you see his lordship last ? ”

“ Last night. My lord dined on board alone. He appeared depressed, and altogether low. He told me he should go to bed early.” ,

“And did he?”

“No. Late in the evening a shore-boat came off—one of those caiques, I think they called them—with a letter, very urgent.”

“For Lord Lydstone?”

“For his lordship. He seemed much disturbed on reading it.”

“Well?”

“My lord called me and said he would dress to go on shore. I gave him out the suit which he was wearing when the body was found.”

“He said nothing about the letter, or its contents?”

“Oh, no! My lord was never given to talking much, although I was his confidential valet since he left college. He never spoke to me of his affairs. My lord always kept his distance, as it was proper he should.”

“Could you tell at all what became of this letter?”

“My lord put it in his pocket when he was dressed.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Most positive.”

“Was any such letter found in the pockets of the deceased?” asked the *attaché* of the Turkish police, through the dragoman of the Embassy.

Nothing of the kind had been found.

“The letter was no doubt removed purposely. This would destroy all trace of its origin. It was evidently

a snare, a bait to lure the poor lord on shore," said one *attaché* to another.

"It is curious that he should have been so ready to swallow it."

"There must have been something peculiarly persuasive in the letter."

"But we have heard that he was much distressed, or annoyed, at receiving it."

"Persuasive in a good or bad sense—probably the latter. At any rate, it was sufficient to lure him on shore."

"Of course there is something beneath all this: some intrigue, perhaps."

"The old story, 'who is she?' I suppose."

"But I thought he was devoted to his cousin, the fair Mrs. Wilders."

"Is she still in Constantinople?"

"Yes, I think so. Still at Misseri's, I believe."

"I wonder whether she has yet heard about this horrible affair. Some one ought to break it to her."

But no one was needed for a task from which all shrank, with not unnatural hesitation. While they still talked, a message was brought in to the effect that Mrs. Wilders was in the antechamber, and her first words, when one of the *attachés* joined her, plainly showed that she had heard of Lord Lydstone's death.

"What a horrible, frightful business!" she said, in

a voice broken with emotion. "Oh! this wicked, accursed town! How did it happen? Do tell me all you know."

"We are completely in the dark. We know nothing more than that Lord Lydstone was found stabbed at daylight this morning in the streets of Stamboul."

"What could have taken him there?"

The *attaché* shrugged his shoulders.

"There is nothing to show, except that he was inveigled by some mysterious communication—a letter sent on board the yacht."

"Inveigled for some base purpose—robbery, perhaps?"

"Very probably. When the body was found, it had been rifled of everything—watch, money, rings: everything had gone."

Mrs. Wilders sighed deeply. It might have been a sigh of relief, but to the *attaché* it seemed a new symptom of horror.

"But how imprudent—how frightfully imprudent—of the poor dear lord to venture alone, and so late at night, into that vile quarter. What could have tempted him?"

"That's what we are all asking. Some unusually powerful motive must have influenced him, we may be sure, and that I hope we may still ascertain. It will be the first step towards detecting the authors of the crime."

“ They will be discovered, you think ? ”

“ No efforts will be spared, you may be sure. The means at our disposal are not very first-rate, perhaps, but we have been promised the fullest help by the Turkish Minister of Police, and we shall leave no stone unturned.”

“ Oh ! I do so hope that the villains will be discovered. Is there anything I can do ? ”

“ Hardly, Mrs. Wilders. But, as you are the only representative of the family, it would be well perhaps for you to go on board the yacht. Poor Lord Lydstone’s papers and effects should be sealed up. One of us will accompany you.”

“ I shall be delighted to be of any use. When shall we start ? ”

“ The sooner the better,” said the *attaché*, Mr. Loftus by name ; and, leaving the inquiry, the two took boat, and were presently alongside the *Arcadia*.

They were received by the captain, a fine specimen of a west-country sailor, a hardy seaman, well schooled in his profession, who had long commanded a vessel in the Mediterranean trade, and was thus well qualified to act as sailing-master in the *Arcadia*’s present cruise.

But Captain Trejago was soft-hearted, easily led, especially by any daughter of Eve, and he had long since succumbed to the fascinations of Mrs. Wilders’s charms. From the day she first trod the deck of the

yacht he had become her humblest, perhaps, but most devoted, admirer and slave.

They exchanged a few words of sympathy and condolence.

"You have lost a good friend, Captain Trejago," said the lady.

"He was that, ma'am. My lord was one of the finest, noblest men that ever trod in shoe-leather. And you, ma'am—it must be very terrible for you."

"Losing him in such a way, it is that which embitters my grief. But this gentleman"—she turned to Mr. Loftus—"comes from the Embassy to seal up his lordship's papers."

"Quite right, ma'am. That ought to be done without delay."

"We can go down into the cabin, then?" said Mrs. Wilders.

"Why! surely, ma'am, you ought to know the way. Mr. Hemmings"—this was the valet—"is not on board, as you know: but I will send the second steward if you want any help."

Assisted by the steward, Mr. Loftus proceeded in a business-like manner to place the seals of the Embassy upon the desk, drawers, and other receptacles in Lord Lydstone's cabin. While they were thus employed, Mrs. Wilders sat at the cabin-table under the skylight, her head resting on one hand, and in an attitude that indicated the prostration of great sorrow. The other

hand was on the table, fingering idly the various objects that strewed it. There were an inkstand, a pen-tray, a seal, a blotting-book or portfolio, and many other odds and ends.

This blotting-book, with the same listless, aimless action, Mrs. Wilders presently turned to, and turned over the leaves one by one.

Between two of them she came upon a letter, left there by accident, or to be answered perhaps that day.

The feminine instinct of curiosity Mrs. Wilders possessed in no common degree. To look at the letter thus exposed, however unworthy the action, was a temptation such a woman could not resist. She began to read it, almost as a matter of course, but carelessly, and with no set purpose, as though it was little likely to contain matter that would interest her. But after the first few lines its perusal deeply absorbed her. A few lines more, and she closed the book, leaving her hand inside, and looked round the cabin.

Mr. Loftus and his assistants were still busily engaged upon their official task. Neither of them was paying the slightest attention to her.

With the hand still concealed inside the blotter, she folded up this missive which seemed so interesting and important, and, having thus got it into a small compass, easily and quickly transferred it to her pocket.

She looked anxiously round, fearing she might have been observed. But no one had noticed her, and pre-

sently, when Mr. Loftus had completed his work, they again left the yacht for the shore.

So soon as Mrs. Wilders regained the privacy of her own room at Misseri's, which was not till late in the day, she took out the letter she had laid hands on in the cabin of the yacht, and read it through slowly and carefully.

It was from Lord Lydstone's father, dated at Essendine Towers, the principal family-seat.

"My dear boy," so it ran, "your mother and I are very grateful to you for your very full and deeply interesting letter, with its ample, but most distressing, account of our dear Anastasius. It is a proud, but melancholy, satisfaction to know that he has maintained the traditions of the family, and bled, like many a Wilders before him, for his country's cause. His condition must, however, be a constant and trying anxiety, and I beseech you, more particularly on your mother's account, to keep us speedily informed of his progress. It is some consolation to think that you are by his side, and it is only right that you should remain at Constantinople so long as your brother is in any danger.

"But do not, my dear boy, linger long in the East. We want you back with us at home. This is your proper place—you who are our eldest born, heir to the title and estates—you should be here at my side. There are other urgent reasons why you should return. You know how anxious we are that you should marry and settle in life. We are doubly so now. Your brothers

before this hateful war broke out made the succession, humanly speaking, almost secure. But the chances of a campaign are unhappily most uncertain. Anastasius has been struck down; we may lose him, which Heaven forbid; a Russian bullet may rob us any day of dear Hugo too. In such a dire and grievous calamity, you alone—only one single, precious life—would remain to keep the title in our line. Do not, I beseech you, suffer it to continue thus. Come home; marry, my son; give us another generation of descendants, and assure the succession.

“I have never made any secret of my wishes in this respect; but I have never told you the real reasons for my deep anxiety. It was my father’s earnest hope—he inherited it from his father, as I have from mine—that the title might never be suffered to pass to his brother Anastasius’s heirs. My uncle had married in direct opposition to his father’s orders, in an age when filial disobedience was deemed a very heinous offence, and he was cut off with a shilling. I might say that he deserved no better; but he did not long survive to bear the penalty of his fault. He left a child—a daughter, however—to whom I would willingly have lent a helping hand, but she spurned all my overtures in a way that grieved me greatly, although I never openly complained. That branch of the family has continued estranged from us; and I am certainly indisposed to reopen communications with them.

“Yet the existence of that branch cannot be ignored. It might, at any time, through any series of mishaps of a kind I hardly like to contemplate, but, nevertheless, quite possible in this world of cross-purposes and sudden surprises, become of paramount importance in the family; for in point of seniority it stands next to ourselves. The next heir to the title, after you and your brothers, is the grandson of Anastasius Wilders, a lad of whom I know nothing, except that he is quite unfitted to assume the dignity of an Earl of Essendine, should fate ever will it that he should succeed. This unfitness you will readily appreciate when I tell you that he is at present a private soldier in a marching-regiment in the East. Stranger still, this regiment is the same as that in which poor Anastasius is serving—the Royal Picts. The young man’s name is McKay—Stanislas Anastasius Wilders McKay. I have never seen him; but I am satisfied of his existence, and of the absolute validity of his claims. My agents have long had their eye on him, and through them I have full information of his movements and disposition. He appears a decent, good sort of youth. But I feel satisfied that we ought, as far as is possible by human endeavour, to prevent his becoming the head of the family.

“You are now in possession of the whole of the facts, my dear Lydstone, and I need scarcely insist upon the way in which you are affected by them. You

will not hesitate, I am sure, after reading this letter, to return to England the moment you can leave your poor brother.”

There was more in the letter, but it dealt with purely business matters, which did not interest the person who had become clandestinely possessed of it.

To say that Mrs. Wilders read this letter with surprise would inadequately express its effect upon her. She was altogether taken aback, dismayed, horror-stricken at its contents.

Now, when chance, or something worse, had cleared the way towards the great end, after which she had always eagerly, but almost hopelessly, hankered, a new and entirely unexpected obstacle suddenly supervened.

Another life was thrust in between her and the proximate enjoyment of high rank and great wealth.

Who was this interloper—this McKay—this private soldier serving in the ranks of the Royal Picts? What sort of man? What were his prospects—his age? Was it likely that he would stand permanently in her way?

These were facts which she must speedily ascertain. The regiment to which he belonged was in the Crimea, part of her uncle's brigade. Surely through him she might discover all she wanted to know. But how could this be best accomplished?

The more she thought over it, the more convinced she was that she ought to go in person to the Crimea, to prosecute her inquiries on the spot. While still

doubtful as to the best means of reaching the theatre of war, it occurred to her that she could not do better than make use of Lord Lydstone's yacht.

It would have to go home eventually—to be paid off and disposed of by Lord Lydstone's heirs. But there was surely no immediate hurry for this, and Mrs. Wilders thought she had sufficient influence with Captain Trejago to persuade him, not only to postpone his departure, but to take a trip to the Crimea.

In this she was perfectly successful, and the day after Lord Lydstone's funeral the *Arcadia*, with a fine breeze aft, steered northward across the Black Sea.

It reached Balacava on the morning of the 5th of November, and Mrs. Wilders immediately despatched a messenger on shore to inform the general of her arrival. That day, however, the general and his brigade were very busily employed. It was the day of Inkerman!

CHAPTER XVI.

“HARD POUNDING.”

MR. HOBSON, as he called himself, had been perfectly right when he gleefully assured Mrs. Wilders that the Russians were gathering up their strength for a supreme effort against the allies. Reinforcements had been steadily pouring into the Crimea for weeks past—two of the Czar’s sons had arrived to stir up the enthusiasm of the soldiers. Menschikoff, who still commanded, counted confidently upon inflicting exemplary chastisement upon the invaders. He looked for nothing less, according to an intercepted despatch, than the destruction or capture of the whole allied army.

No doubt the enemy had now an overwhelming superiority in numbers. The total land forces under Prince Menschikoff’s command, including the garrison of Sebastopol, were 120,000 strong. These numbers

included a large body of cavalry and a formidable field artillery.

The entire allied army was barely half that strength. It was called upon, moreover, to occupy an immense front—a front which extended from the sea at Kamiesch to the Tchernaya, and from the Tchernaya, by a long and circuitous route, back to the sea at Balaclava. This line, offensive as regards the siege-works, but defensive along the unduly extended and exposed right flank at Balaclava, was close on twenty miles. The great length of front made severe demands upon the allied troops; it could only be manned by dangerously splitting up their whole strength into many weak units, none of which could be very easily or rapidly reinforced by the rest.

Perhaps the weakest part of the whole line was the extreme right, held at this moment by the British Second Division. Here, on an exposed and vitally important flank, the whole available force was barely 3,000 men. For some time past it had been intended to fortify this flank by field-works, armed with heavy artillery. But, although the necessity for protecting it was thus admitted, the urgency was not exactly understood, or at least was subordinated to other operations; as a matter of fact, this flank was “in the air,” to use a military phrase, lying quite open and exposed, with only an insufficient, greatly harassed garrison on the spot, and no supports or reserves near at hand.

The utmost assistance on which this small body could

count, as was afterwards shown, under stress, too, of most imminent danger, was 14,000 men. Not that all these numbers were fully available at any one time; they were constantly affected and diminished by casualties in the height and heat of the action; so that never were there more than 13,000, French and English, actually engaged.

On the other hand, the Russian attacking force were 70,000 strong, and they had with them 235 guns.

It was in truth another battle of giants, like Waterloo. “Hard pounding,” as the great duke said of that other fight; a fierce trial of strength; a protracted, seemingly unequal, struggle between the dead weight of the aggregate many and the individual prowess of the undaunted, indomitable few.

The enemy’s plan of action had been minutely and carefully prepared. We know it now. He meant to use his whole strength along his entire front—in part with feigned and deceiving demonstrations to “contain” or hold inactive the troops that faced him, in part with determined onslaught, delivered with countless thousands, in massive columns, against the reputed weakest point of our line.

This plan Menschikoff hastened to put into execution. Time pressed: the enemy had learnt through spies that an assault on Sebastopol was close at hand. Besides, the Grand Dukes had arrived, and the troops, worked up to the highest pitch of loyal fanatic fervour, were

mad to fight under the eyes of the sons of their father, the holy Czar.

Dawn broke late on that drear November morning : November the 5th—a day destined to be ever memorable in the annals of British arms : a dawn that was delayed and darkened by dense, driving mists, and rain-clouds, black and lowering.

Nothing, however, had broken the repose of the British camp, or hinted at the near approach of countless foes.

The night had been tranquil ; the enemy quiet ; only, in the valley beneath our pickets on the Inkerman heights, some sentries had heard the constant rumbling of wheels, but their officers to whom they reported did not interpret the same aright, as the movement of artillery.

An hour or more before daylight the church-bells of Sebastopol rang out a joyous peal. Why not ? It was the Sabbath morning. But these chimes, alas ! ushered in a Sunday of struggle and bloodshed, not of peaceful devotion and prayer.

The outlying pickets had been relieved, and were marching campwards ; the Second Division had had its customary “ daylight parade ” ; the men had stood to their arms for half-an-hour, and, as nothing was stirring, had been dismissed to their tents ; the fatigue-parties had been despatched for rations, water, fuel—in a word, the ordinary daily duties of the camp had commenced,

when the sharp rattle of musketry rang out angrily, and well sustained in the direction of our foremost picket on Shell Hill.

“That means mischief!” The speaker was General Codrington, who, according to invariable rule, had ridden out before daylight to reconnoitre and watch the enemy. “Halt the off-going pickets; we may want all the men we can lay hands on.”

Then this prompt and judicious commander proceeded to line the Victoria ridge, which faced Mount Inkerman, with the troops he had thus impounded, and galloped off to put the rest of his brigade under arms.

The firing reached and roused another energetic general officer, Pennefather, who now commanded the Second Division in place of De Lacy Evans.

“Sound the assembly!” he cried. “Let the division stand to its arms. Every man must turn out: every mother’s son of them. We shall be engaged hot and strong in less than half-an-hour.”

As pugnacious as any terrier, Pennefather, with unerring instinct, smelt the coming fight.

His division was quickly formed on what was afterwards called the “Home Ridge,” and which was its regular parade-ground. But the general had no idea of awaiting attack in this position. It was his plan rather to push forward and fight the enemy wherever he could be found. With this idea he sent a portion of his strength down the slope to “feed the pickets,” as he

himself called it, whilst another was advanced to the right front under General Wilders, and with this body went the Royal Picts. The Second Division benefited greatly by this advance, for the Russians were now absolute masters of the crest of the Inkerman hill, where they established their batteries, and poured forth volley after volley, all of which passed harmlessly over the heads of our men. Meanwhile the alarm spread. A continuous firing, momentarily increasing in vigour, showed that this was no affair of outposts, but the beginning of a great battle. The bulk of the allied forces were under arms, and notice of the attack had been despatched to Lord Raglan at the English headquarters.

In less than a quarter-of-an-hour, long before 7 a.m., Lord Raglan was in his saddle, ready to ride wherever he might be required most.

But whither should he go? The battle, as it seemed, was waging all around him, on every side of the allied position. A vigorous fire was kept up from Sebastopol; down in the Tchernaya valley the army, supposed to be still under Liprandi, but really commanded by Gortschakoff, had advanced towards the Woronzoff road, and threatened to repeat the tactics of Balaclava by attacking with still greater force the right rear of our position; last of all, around Mount Inkerman, the unceasing sound of musketry and big guns betrayed the development of a serious attack.

Lord Raglan was not long in doubt. He knew the weakest point of the British position, and rightly guessed that the enemy would know it too.

“I shall go to Inkerman,” he said. “That is their real point, I feel sure. And we must have up all the reinforcements we can muster. You, Burghersh, tell Sir George Cathcart to move up his division and support Pennefather and Brown. You, Steele, beg General Bosquet to lend me all the men he can spare.”

Pennefather had his hands full by the time Lord Raglan arrived. With a paltry 3,000 odd men he was confronting 25,000 ; but, happily, the morning was so dark and the brushwood so thick that his men were hardly conscious that they were thus outnumbered.

Not that they would have greatly cared ; they were manifestly animated with a dogged determination to deny the enemy every inch of the ground, and with unflagging courage they disputed his advance, although they were so few. Once more it was the “Thin Red Line” against the heavy column: hundreds against thousands, a task which for any other troops would have been both hopeless and absurd.

But Pennefather’s people stoutly held their own. On his left front, one wing of the 49th Regiment routed a whole Russian column, and drove it back at the point of the bayonet down the hill ; to give way in turn, but not till it was threatened by 9,000 men. Next, four companies of the Connaught Rangers stoutly engaged twenty times their number, and only yielded after a

stubborn fight. General Buller came up next, with a wing of the 77th, which was faced by a solid mass five times as strong.

"There are the Russians," cried Egerton, who commanded the 77th. "What shall we do, general?"

"Charge them!" was Buller's prompt reply.

The next instant the slender line, with a joyous hurrah, was engulfed in a giant column. The effect was instantaneous. The Russian column reeled before the fiery charge, wavered, then broke and fled.

More to the right, Mauleverer prolonged the line with the 30th, and gave so good an account of the Russians in his front that they, too, fell back in disorder; and Bellairs, with a party of the 49th, was equally triumphant.

Beyond these forces, General Wilders, with whom young McKay now rode as extra aide, led a fraction of his brigade, including the Royal Picts, against the Sandbag Battery, a point deemed important because it commanded the extreme right of the position.

On the far sides of the slopes, beyond the battery were 4,000 Russian troops, and the mere sight of Wilders with his deployed line sufficed to shake the steadiness of the foe. The Russian bugles sounded a retreat, the leading companies faced about, and, communicating the panic to those behind the hill, the whole mass gave way and ran down the slope, followed by a destructive fire from the British line.

Thus ended the first phase of this unequal contest.

Pennefather had triumphed to an extent of which neither he nor his heroes were fully aware. Barely 1,200 men had routed 15,000! The few had achieved a decisive victory over the many.

But the struggle had only just begun. Many more and still severer trials awaited our starving, weary, sorely-beset soldiers that day.

The enemy had numberless fresh and still untried troops at hand. Column after column had been moving steadily forward, some from the town, some from the eastern side of the Tchernaya, and already the Russian generals were in a position to renew the fight. A new onslaught was now organised, to be made by 19,000 men under cover of ninety guns.

So far in those early days of the battle the brunt of it had fallen upon the Second Division, supported by a portion of the Light. Stout old General Pennefather had had the supreme control throughout.

“I will not interfere with you,” Lord Raglan said, as, standing by his staff, he watched the progress of the fight from the ridge. “You know your ground, as you have occupied it so long with your camp. I’m sure I can trust you.”

“Thank you, my lord. I’ll do my best, never fear,” replied Pennefather.

“Their artillery fire is very troublesome, and must be over-mastered. If I could only get up some of the siege-train guns to help you. Let some one go back to

the artillery park, and tell them I want a couple of eighteen pounders."

An aide-de-camp at once galloped off with the order, but two or three eventful hours elapsed before these guns were brought to bear upon the action.

Pennefather's men, although for the moment triumphant, had their hands full. They showed an undaunted front or "knotted line" of fighting-men: the remnants of the pickets, fragments, and odds-and-ends of many regiments, mixed up and intermingled, still in contact with the enemy, and so far still without supports.

Officers came back rather despondingly to ask for help.

"I cannot send you a single man," was the firm reply to one applicant. "You must stand your ground somehow."

"We should be all right, sir, but the men have run out of ammunition."

"It's no use. I can't give you a round. What does it matter? Don't make difficulties. Stick to your bayonets. And remember you've got to hold on where you are, or we shall be driven into the sea."

The want of cartridges was what the troops felt most direly. They growled savagely and grumbled at the mismanagement that kept back these indispensable supplies.

Only here and there the energetic action of a few shrewd officers did something to mend the mischief.

Thus the Royal Picts benefited by the astute promptitude of long-headed Sergeant Hyde. He was acting as quartermaster, and as such had been left behind in camp, although sorely against his will, when the rest of the regiment went out to fight. But he had heard the long, well-sustained roll of musketry-fire, and it satisfied one not new to war that a very close contest had begun.

“They’ll soon fire away their cartridges at this rate,” he said to himself. “If I could only get the ammunition-reserves up to them! I’ll do it.” And on his own responsibility he laid hands on all the beasts in camp: spare chargers, officers’ ponies, and other animals, and quickly loaded them with the cartridge-boxes. Then, leading the cavalcade, he hurried to the front, asking as he went for the Royal Picts.

He found his regiment in the Sandbag Battery, and they received him, so soon as his errand was known, with a wild cheer.

“Excellently done!” cried Colonel Blythe. “You have a good head on your shoulders, Hyde: ammunition was the one thing we needed.”

“Yes,” shouted a brawny soldier, “we were just killed for want of cartridges.”

“And want of food,” grumbled another; “sorra bite nor sup since yesterday.”

“Sergeant darling,” said a third, “won’t you sound the breakfast-bugle? Fighting on an empty stomach is but a poor pastime.”

Thus, in the interval between two combats, but always under a galling and destructive fire, they joked and bandied words with a freedom that discipline would not have tolerated at any other time.

“I think, colonel, I could bring up the rations: biscuits and cold pork, anyhow,” suggested Hyde.

“And the grog-tub: don’t forget that, sergeant,” cried a fresh voice.

“By all means, Hyde, get us what you can,” replied Blythe; “the men are all fasting, and some sort of a meal would be very good for them, only you must keep a sharp look-out for us. We may not be still here when you return.”

This Sandbag Battery, which for the moment the Royal Picts still held, was the object of ceaseless contention that day. Although at best but an empty prize, useful to neither side, because its parapet was too high to be fired over, the battery was lost and won, captured and recaptured, constantly during the battle.

Even now the Russians, regaining heart, had made it the first aim of their fresh attack.

General Dannenberg, who was now in chief command, had a twofold object: he was resolved to press the centre of the English position and at the same time vigorously attack the right, throwing all his weight first upon the Sandbag Battery.

The small force under General Wilders, which included the Royal Picts, soon began to feel the stress of this renewed onslaught.

“ They are coming on again and in great numbers, sir,” said McKay to his general.

“ I see, and menacing both our flanks. We shall be surrounded and swallowed up if we don’t take care.”

“ Some support ought to be near by this time, sir,” replied McKay.

“ Ride back, and see. I don’t want to be outflanked.”

McKay retired and presently came upon two battalions of Guards, Grenadiers and Fusiliers, advancing under the command of the Duke of Cambridge.

“ General Wilders, sir, is very hard pressed in the Sandbag Battery,” said McKay, briefly.

“ I’ll march at once to his aid,” replied the duke, promptly.

“ Sir George Cathcart and part of the Fourth Division are coming up, and not far off,” added one of the staff; “ we won’t wait for any one. Ride on ahead, sir,”—this was to McKay,—“ and let your general know he is about to be supported by her Majesty’s Guards.”

CHAPTER XVII.

A COSTLY VICTORY.

Now followed one of the fiercest and bloodiest episodes of the day.

Wilders had made the best show with his little band and clung tenaciously to the battery yet. The Russians came on and on, with stubborn insistence, and all along the line a hand-to-hand fight ensued. Numbers told at length, and the small garrison was slowly forced back, after enduring serious loss.

It was in this retreat that General Wilders received a dangerous wound: a fragment of a shell tore away the left leg below the knee.

“Will some one kindly lift me from my horse?” he said quietly, schooling his face to continue calm, in spite of the agony he endured.

McKay was on the ground in an instant and by his general's side.

"Don't mind me, my boy," said the general. "Leave me with the doctors."

"On no account, sir; I should not think of it."

"Yes, yes. They want every man. Attach yourself to Blythe; he will command the brigade now. Do not stay with me: I insist."

McKay yielded to the general's entreaties, but first saw the wounded man bestowed in a litter and carried to the rear.

Then he joined Colonel Blythe.

But now fortune smiled again. Our artillery had stayed the Russian advance; and the Grenadier Guards, followed by the Fusiliers, once more regained the coveted but worthless stronghold.

They could not hold it permanently, however: the tide of battle ebbed and flowed across it, and the victory leant alternately to either side. The Guards fought like giants, outnumbered but never outmatched, wielding their weapons with murderous prowess, and, when iron missiles failed them, hurling rocks—Titan-like—at their foes.

Even when won this Sandbag Battery was a perilous prize: tempting the English leaders to adventure too far to the front and to leave a great gap in the general line of defence unoccupied and undefended.

Lord Raglan saw the error and would have skilfully averted the impending evil.

“That opening leaves the left of the Guards exposed,” he said to Airey. “Tell Cathcart to fill it.”

“You are to move to the left and support the Guards,” was the message conveyed to Cathcart, “but not to descend or leave the plateau. Those are Lord Raglan’s orders.”

But Sir George chose to interpret them his own way, and already—with Torrens’s brigade and a weak body at best—he had gone down the hill to join the Guards. In the sharp but misdirected encounter which followed, the general lost his life, and his force, with the Guards, were for a time cut off from their friends.

A Russian column had wedged in at the gap and for a time forbade retreat, but it was at length sheered off by the first of the French reinforcements; and the intercepted British, in greatly diminished numbers, by degrees won their way home.

This fighting around the Sandbag Battery had cost us very dear: Cathcart was killed, the Guards were decimated, and Wilders’s brigade, now commanded by Colonel Blythe, had fallen back, spent and disorganised. So serious indeed were these losses that for the next hour the brigade possessed no coherent shape, and only by dint of the unwearied exertions of its officers was it rallied sufficiently to share in the later phases of the fight.

Meanwhile the centre of our line, where Pennefather stood posted on the Home Ridge, had been furiously assailed. Gathering their forces under shelter of a

deep ravine, the Russian general sent up column after column, first against the left and then against the right of the Ridge. Gravely weakened by his early encounter, Pennefather had only a handful of his own men to meet this attack. They were now pressed back indeed, although their general was beginning to wield detachments from other commands. A portion of the Fourth Division had been put under his orders.

General Cathcart, just before his death, had come to him with a battalion of the Rifle Brigade.

“They can do anything,” he had said. “Where are they wanted most?”

“Everywhere!” had been old Pennefather’s reply.

But now, having at hand this splendid body of infantry, of whom their leader had been so pardonably proud, he hurled them at the flank of a column that was forcing back its own men.

The effect of the charge was instantaneous: the Russians could not withstand it; and, the men of the Second Division again advancing, the foe was pressed as far as the Barrier, where he was held at bay.

But the left of the ridge was still menaced, although the centre was cleared. On this flank Pennefather disposed of some new troops, also of the Fourth Division: the 63rd and part of the 21st.

He rode up to their head and made them a short but stirring address.

“Now, Sixty-third, let’s see what metal you are made

of! The enemy is close upon you: directly you see them, fire a volley and charge!”

His answer was a vehement cheer. The 63rd fired as it was ordered, and then drove the Russians down the hill.

One more trial awaited Pennefather at this period of the battle. His right, on the Home Ridge, was now assailed; but here again the 20th, with their famous Minden yell—an old historical war-cry, always cherished and secretly practised in the corps—met and overcame the enemy. They were actively supported by the 57th, the gallant “Diehards,” a title they had earned at Albuera, one of the bloodiest of the Peninsular fights.

Thus, for the second time, Pennefather stood victorious on the ground he so obstinately held. After two hours of incessant fighting the Russians had made no headway. But although twice repulsed they had inflicted terrible losses on our people. They had still in hand substantial supports untouched; they had brought up more and more guns; they were as yet far from despondent, and their generals might still count upon making an impression by sheer weight of numbers alone.

As for ourselves, the English were almost at the end of their resources. There were no fresh troops to bring up; only the Third Division remained in reserve, and it was fully occupied in guarding the trenches.

The French, it is true, could have thrown the weight

of many thousands into the scale; but General Canrobert had not set his more distant divisions in motion, and the only troops that could affect the struggle—Bosquet's—were still far to the rear.

In the contest that was now to be renewed the balance between the offensive forces was more than ever unequal.

Dannenberg gathered together upon the northern slopes of Mount Inkerman some 17,000 men, partly those who had been already defeated, but were by no means disheartened, and partly perfectly fresh troops. On the other hand, Pennefather's force was reduced to a little over 3,000, to which a couple of French regiments might now be added, 1,600 strong. The Russians had a hundred guns in position; the allies barely half that number.

Yet in the struggle that was imminent the battle of Inkerman was practically to be decided.

The Russian general had now resolved to make a concentrated attack in column upon Pennefather's Ridge. He sent up another great mass from the quarry ravine, flanked and covered by crowds of skirmishers. In the centre, the vanguard pressed forward swiftly, drove back the slender garrison of the Barrier, and advanced unchecked towards the Ridge. There were no English troops to oppose their advance; a French battalion only was close at hand, and they seemed to shrink from the task of opposing the foe.

“They do not seem very firm, these Frenchmen,” said Lord Raglan, who was closely watching events. “Why, gracious goodness, they are giving way! We must strengthen them by some of our own men. Bring up the 55th—they have re-formed, I see. Stay! what is that?”

As he spoke, an English staff officer was seen to ride up to the wavering French battalion. From his raised hand and impassioned gestures he was evidently addressing them. He was speaking in French, too, it was clear, for his harangue had the effect of restoring confidence in the shaken body. The battalion no longer stood irresolute, but advanced to meet the foe.

“Excellently done!” cried Lord Raglan. “Find out for me at once who that staff-officer is.”

An aide-de-camp galloped quickly to the spot, and returned with the answer—

“Mr. McKay, my lord, aide-de-camp to General Wilders.”

“Remember that name, Airey, and see after the young fellow. But where is his general?”

“Wounded, and gone to the rear, my lord,” was the reply.

The bold demeanour of the French battalion restrained the advancing enemy until some British troops could reach the threatened point. Then together they met the advance. The Russian attack was now fully developed, and his great column was well up the slopes of

the ridge. While the French, animated by the warm language of Pennefather, stopped its head, a mad charge delivered by a small portion of the 55th broke into its flank.

The Russians halted, hesitating under this unexpected attack. Pennefather instantly saw the check, and gave voice to a loud "hurrah." The cry was taken up by his men, and the French drums came to the front and sounded the *pas de charge*. With a wild burst of enthusiasm, the allies, intermingled, raced forward, and once again the foe was driven down the hill. At the same time his flanking columns were met and forced back on the left by the 21st and the 63rd.

The Barrier was again reoccupied by our troops, and the third, the chief and most destructive Russian onslaught, had also failed.

The day was still young; it was little past 9 a.m., and the battle as yet was neither lost nor won.

The Russians had been three times discomfited and driven back, but they still held the ground they had first seized upon the crests of the Inkerman hill, and, seemingly, defied the allies to dislodge them.

The English were far too weak to do this. Our whole efforts were concentrated upon keeping the enemy at bay at the Barrier, where Blythe, now in chief command, managed with difficulty, and with a very mixed force, to beat off assailants still pertinacious and tormenting.

The French were now coming up in support, but of

their troops already on the ground two battalions had gone astray, wandering off on a fool's errand towards the pernicious Sandbag Battery, where they, too, were destined to meet repulse.

Indeed, the Russians, despite their last discomfiture, were regaining the ascendant.

But now the sagacious forethought of Lord Raglan was to bear astonishing fruit. It has been told in the previous chapter how he was bent upon bringing up some of the siege-train guns, and how he had despatched a messenger for them. His aide-de-camp had found the colonel of the siege-park artillery anticipating the order. Two 18-pounders, which since Balaclava had been kept ready for instant service, were waiting to be moved. There were no teams of horses at hand to drag them up to the front, but the man-harness was brought out, and the willing gunners cheerily entered the shafts, and threw themselves with fierce energy into the collars. Officers willingly lent a hand, and thus the much-needed ordnance was got up a long and toilsome incline.

It was a slow job, however, and two full hours elapsed before they were placed in position on the right flank of the Home Ridge.

"At last!" was Lord Raglan's greeting; "now, my lads, load and fire as fast as you can."

The artillery officers themselves laid their guns, which were served and fired with promptitude and precision.

Now followed a short but sanguinary duel. The Russian guns answered shot for shot, and at first worked terrible havoc in our ranks.

Colonel Gambier of the artillery was struck down: other officers were wounded, and many of the men.

Still Lord Raglan stood his ground, watching the action with keen interest and the most admirable self-possession. He was perfectly unmoved by the heavy fire and the carnage it occasioned.

One or two of his staff besought him to move a little further to the rear, but he met the suggestion with good-natured contempt.

"My lord rather likes being under fire than otherwise," whispered one aide-de-camp to another.

He certainly took it uncommonly cool, and in the thick of it could unbend with kindly condescension when a sergeant who was passing had his forage-cap knocked off by the wind of a passing shot.

"A near thing that, my man," he said, smiling.

The sergeant—it was Hyde, returning from the Barrier, where he had been with more ammunition—coolly dusted his cap on his knee, replaced it on his head, and then, formally saluting the Commander-in-Chief, replied with a self-possession that delighted Lord Raglan—

"A miss is as good as a mile, my lord."

Through all this the 18-pounders kept up a ceaseless and effective fire. They were clearly of a heavier calibre than any the Russians owned, and soon the

weight of their metal and our gunners' unerring aim began to tell upon the enemy's ranks.

The Russian guns were frequently shifted from spot to spot, but they could not escape the murderous fire.

At last, in truth, the Russian hold on Inkerman hill was shaken to the core.

Victory at last was in our grasp, and, but for the old and fatal drawback of insufficient numbers, the battle must have ended in a complete disaster for the Russian arms. A vigorous offensive, undertaken by fresh troops, must have ended in the speedy overthrow, possibly annihilation, of the enemy.

But the only troops available for the purpose were the French. Bosquet had now come up with his brigade, and D'Autemarre, released by Gortschakoff's retreat, had followed with a second. There were thus some seven or eight thousand French available. Still Canrobert was disinclined to move.

He was now with Lord Raglan on the Ridge, with his arm in a sling, for he had just been struck by a shrapnel-shell.

He was downcast and dejected, for Bosquet had gone off on a wild-goose chase after two errant battalions, and had shared in their repulse. Just now, indeed, so far from proving the saviours of the hard-pressed English, our French allies were themselves in retreat.

Lord Raglan strove to reassure his colleague.

"All is going well, my general," he said; "we are winning the day."

“I wish I could think so,” replied Canrobert.

“Well, but listen to the message my aide-de-camp has brought from General Pennefather. What did he say, Calthorpe?”

“General Pennefather, my lord, says he only wants a few fresh troops to follow the enemy up now, and lick them to the devil. These are his very words, my lord.”

Lord Raglan laughed heartily, and translated his stout-hearted lieutenant’s language literally for Canrobert.

“Ah! what a brave man!” cried the French general, lighting up. “A splendid general, a most valiant man.”

“You see now, general; one more effort and the day is ours. Won’t you help?”

“But, my lord, what can I do? The Russians are all round us still, and in great strength. See there, there, and there,” he cried, pointing with his unwounded arm.

“Tell General Pennefather to come and speak to me at once,” Lord Raglan now said to the aide-de-camp, hoping that the gallant bearing of the victorious veteran would infuse fresh hope in Canrobert.

Now General Pennefather galloped up, as radiantly happy as any schoolboy who has just finished his fifteenth round.

“I should like to press them, my lord. They are

retreating already, and we could give a fine account of them."

"What have you left to pursue with?" asked Lord Raglan, still hoping to encourage the French to undertake the offensive.

"Seven or eight hundred now, in the first brigade alone."

"To pursue thousands!" exclaimed Canrobert, when this was interpreted to him; "you must be mad! I will have nothing to do with this; we have done enough for one day."

Now again, as on the Alma, when the heights had been carried by storm, the fruits of victory were lost by our unenterprising, over-cautious allies.

This, indeed, is the true story of Inkerman, as told on incontestable evidence of the great historian of the war. The French did not rescue the English from disaster; they were themselves repulsed. At the close of the action, when they might have actively pursued, their irresolution robbed the victory of its most decisive results.

It was a terrible and far too costly victory, after all. The English army, already terribly weak, suffered such serious losses in the fight that there were those who would have at once re-embarked the remnants and raised the siege. Retreat on the morrow of victory would have been craven indeed, but to stand firm with such shattered forces was a bold and hazardous resolve, for which Lord Raglan deserves the fullest credit, and

the coming winter, with its terrible trials, was destined to put his self-reliance to the proof.

It is time to return more particularly to our friends, who took part in this hard-fought, glorious action.

By midday the worse part of the battle was over, and although Colonel Blythe still clung to his Barrier, whence he launched forth small parties to harass the retreating foe, McKay was released of his attendance upon the acting brigadier, and suffered to follow his own general to the rear.

They had carried poor old Wilders in a litter to one of the hospital marquees in the rear of the Second Division camp. The aide-de-camp found him perfectly conscious, with two doctors by his side.

McKay was allowed to enter into conversation with his chief.

“How does it go?” asked the old general, feebly, but with eager interest.

“The enemy are in full retreat, sir; beaten all along the line.”

“Thank Heaven!” said the general, as he sank back upon his pillow.

“How are you, sir?”

“Very weak. My fighting days are done.”

“You must not say that, sir; the doctors will soon pull you round. Won’t you?” said McKay, looking round at the nearest surgeon’s face.

“Of course. I have no fear, provided only the general will keep quiet, and ——”

“That means that I should go,” said the aide-de-camp. “I shall be close at hand, sir, for I mean to be chief nurse,” and he left the tent.

Outside the surgeon ended the sentence he had left incomplete.

“The general,” he said, “will be in no immediate danger if we could count upon his having proper care. With that, I think we could promise to save his life.”

“He shall have the most devoted attention from me,” began McKay.

“We know that. But he wants more: the very best hospital treatment, with all its comforts and appliances; and how can we possibly secure these here on this bleak plateau?”

Just then one of the general’s orderlies came in sight and approached McKay.

“A letter, sir, for the general, marked ‘Immediate.’”

“The general can attend to no correspondence. You know he has been desperately wounded.”

“Yes, sir, but the messenger would not take that for an answer.”

“Who is he?”

“A seaman from Balaclava, belonging to some yacht that has just arrived.”

“Lord Lydstone’s perhaps. That would indeed be fortunate,” went on McKay, turning to the doctor. “It is the general’s cousin, you know; and on board the yacht—if we could get him there?”

“That is not impossible, I think. In fact, it would have to be done.”

“Well, on board the yacht he would get the careful nursing you speak of. Is he well enough, do you think, to read this letter?”

“Under the circumstances, yes. Give it me, and I will take it in to the general.”

A few minutes later McKay was again called in to the marquee.

“Oh, McKay, I wish you would be so good ——” began the wounded man. “This letter, I mean, is from Mrs. Wilders; she has just arrived.”

“Here, in the Crimea, sir?”

“Yes, she has come up in Lord Lydstone’s yacht, and I want you to be so good as to go to her and break the news.” He pointed sadly down the bed towards his shattered limb.

“Of course, sir, as soon as I can order out a fresh horse I will go to Balaclava. Perhaps I had better stay on board for a time, and make arrangements to receive you; if Lord Lydstone will allow me, that is to say.”

“Lord Lydstone is not there. Mrs. Wilders tells me she has come up alone, and in the very nick of time. But now be off, McKay, and lose no time. Be gentle with her: it will be a great shock, I am afraid.”

The aide-de-camp galloped off on his errand, and finding a boat from the yacht waiting by the wharf in

Balaclava harbour he put up his horse and went off to the *Arcadia*. She was still lying outside.

McKay's appearance was not exactly presentable. He had been turned out at daybreak with the rest of the division at the first alarm, and had had no time to attend to his toilette, such as it was in these rough campaigning days. Since then he had been in his saddle for several hours and constantly in the heat and turmoil of the fight. His clothes were torn, mud-encrusted, and bloodstained; his face was black and grimy with gunpowder smoke.

But he had no thought of his looks as he sprang on to the white, trimly-kept deck of the yacht.

Captain Trejago met him.

"Who are you?" asked the sailing-master, rather abruptly.

"I wish to see Mrs. Wilders," replied McKay, still more curtly.

"You had better wash your face first," said Captain Trejago, very jealous of the proper respect due to Mrs. Wilders. "It is uncommonly dirty."

"And so would yours be if you had been doing what I have."

"What might that be?"

"Fighting."

"Perhaps you are ready to begin again? If so, I'm your man. But you will have to wait till we get on shore."

“Pshaw ! don’t be an idiot. We have been engaged with the Russians ever since daybreak. But there, this is mere waste of breath. I tell you I want to see Mrs. Wilders. I come from the general. I am his aide-de-camp. Show the way, will you ? ”

“It may be as you say,” muttered Trejago, not half satisfied. “But you will have to wait till Mrs. Wilders says she will receive you.”

“What’s the matter ? Who is this person ? ”

It was the voice of Mrs. Wilders, who now advanced from the stern of the yacht, having seen but not overheard the latter part of the altercation.

McKay stepped forward.

“I have brought you a message from the general.”

“Why did he not come himself ? ”

“It was quite impossible.”

“I particularly begged him to come. Who, pray, are you ? Stay ! ” she went on, “I ought to know your face. We have met before : at Gibraltar, was it not ? ”

“Yes, at Gibraltar. I was the general’s orderly sergeant.”

“And do you still hold the same distinguished position ? ”

“No, Mrs. Wilders,” said McKay, simply ; “I am now a commissioned officer, and have the honour to be the general’s aide-de-camp.”

“Rapid promotion that : I hope you deserved it. May I ask your name ? ”

“McKay—Stanislas McKay.”

Could it be possible? The very man she was in search of the first to speak to her on arrival here at Balaclava! Surely there must be some mistake! Mastering her emotion at the suddenness of this news, she said—

“You will forgive my curiosity, but have you any other Christian names?”

“My name in full is Stanislas Anastasius Wilders McKay.”

“That answer is my best excuse for asking you the question. You are, then, our cousin?”

McKay bowed.

“I have heard of you,” said Mrs. Wilders. “Allow me to congratulate you,” and she held out her hand.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NOVEMBER GALE.

“WILL you not come down into the cabin?” said Mrs. Wilders, civilly; “the lunch is still on the table, and I daresay you will be glad of something to eat.”

“I have not touched food all day, Mrs. Wilders.”

“You must have been very busy, then?”

“Surely you have heard what has happened this morning?”

Mrs. Wilders looked at him amazed.

“A desperate battle has been fought.”

“Another!” She thought of what Mr. Hobson had told her. “How has it ended? In whose favour? Are we safe here?”

“There is no cause for alarm. The Russians have been handsomely beaten again; but we have suffered

considerable loss," he said, hesitating a little, fearing to be too brusque with his bad news.

"Is that why the general could not come?"

"Exactly. He has had a great deal to do."

"Nothing should have prevented him from coming here."

It never seemed to have occurred to her that he had been in any danger; nor, as McKay noticed, had she asked whether he was safe and well.

"It was quite impossible for him to come. He—he——"

"Pray go on! You are very tantalising."

"The general has been badly wounded," McKay now blurted out abruptly.

"Dear! dear!" she said, rather coolly. "I am very sorry to hear it. When and how did it occur?"

McKay explained.

"Poor dear!" This was the first word of sympathy she had spoken, and even now she made no offer to go to him.

"The doctors think there is no great danger if——"

"Danger!" This seemed to rouse her. "I trust not."

"No danger," went on McKay, "if only he can be properly nursed. They were glad to hear of the arrival of the yacht, and think he ought to be moved on board."

"Oh, of course this will be the best place for him. When can he be brought? I suppose I ought to go to

him. Will it be possible to get a conveyance to the front ? ”

“ Nothing but an ambulance, I fear. And you know there is no road.”

“ Upon my word I hardly know what to say.”

“ We could manage a saddle-horse for you, I dare-say.”

“ I’m a very poor horsewoman : you see I’m half a foreigner. No ; the best plan will be to stay on board and get everything ready for the poor dear man. When may we expect him ? ”

“ The doctors seem to wish the removal might not be delayed. You may see us in the morning.”

“ So, then, I am to have the pleasure of meeting you again, Mr. McKay ? ”

“ I should be sorry to leave the general while I can be of any use. He has been a kind friend to me.”

“ And you are a relation. Of course it is very natural you should wish to be at his side. I am sure I shall be delighted to have your assistance in nursing him,” said Mrs. Wilders, very graciously ; and soon afterwards McKay took his leave.

“ So that is the last stumbling-block in my son’s way : a sturdy, self-reliant sort of gentleman, likely to be able to take care of himself. I should like to get him into my power : but how, I wonder, how ? ”

Next day they moved the wounded general to Balaclava, and got him safely on board the *Arcadia*. He was accompanied by a doctor and McKay.

Mrs. Wilders received her husband with the tenderest solicitude.

"How truly fortunate I came here!" she said, with the tears in her eyes.

"Lydstone made no objection, then? Has he remained at Constantinople?" the general asked, feebly.

"Lydstone? Don't you know? He——" But why should she tell him? It would only distress him greatly, and, in his present precarious condition, he should be spared all kind of emotion. With this idea she had begged Captain Trejago to say nothing as yet of the sad end of his noble owner.

"Will it not be best to get the general down to Scutari?" she asked the doctor.

"In a day or two, yes. When he has recovered the shaking of the move on board."

"The captain wanted to know. He has no wish to go inside the harbour, as it is so crowded; but he would not like to remain long off this coast. It might be dangerous, he says."

"A lee-shore, you know," added Captain Trejago, for himself. "Look at those straight cliffs; fancy our grinding on to them, with a southerly, or rather a south-westerly, gale!"

"Is there any immediate prospect of bad weather?" asked McKay. He and the sailing-master were by this time pretty good friends.

"I don't much like the look of the glass. It's rather jumpy; if anything, inclined to go back."

“What should you do if it came on dirty?” the skipper was asked.

“Up stick, and run out to get an offing. It would be our only chance, with this coast to leeward.”

Three or four days later the skipper came with a long face to the doctor.

“I like the look of it less and less. The glass has dropped suddenly : such a drop as I’ve never seen out of the tropics. Is there anything against our putting to sea this afternoon?”

It so happened that General Wilders was not quite so well.

“I’d rather you waited a day or two,” replied the surgeon. “It might make all the difference to the patient.”

“Well, if it must be,” replied the captain, very discontentedly.

“It’s his life that’s in question.”

“Against all of ours. But let it be so. We’ll try and weather the storm.”

Next morning, about dawn, it burst upon them—the memorable hurricane of the 14th November, which did such appalling damage on shore and at sea. Not a tent remained standing on the plateau. The tornado swept the whole surface clean.

At sea the sight as daylight grew stronger was enough to make the stoutest heart, ignorant landsman’s or practised seaman’s, quail. A whole fleet—great line-of-battle ships, a crowd of transports under sail and

steam—lay at the mercy of the gale, which increased every moment in force and fury. The waves rose with the wind, and the white foam of “stupendous” breakers angrily lashed the rock-bound shore.

“Will you ride it out?” asked McKay of the captain, as the two stood with the doctor crouched under the gunwale of the yacht and holding on to the shrouds.

“Why shouldn’t we?” replied Trejago, shortly, as though the question was an insult to himself and his ship.

“That’s more than some can say!” cried the doctor, pointing to one great ship, the ill-fated *Prince*, which had evidently dragged her anchors and was drifting perilously towards the cliffs.

“Our tackle is sound and the holding is good,” said Trejago, hopefully. “But we ought not to speak so loud. It may alarm Mrs. Wilders.”

“Does she not know our danger? Some one ought to tell her. You had better go, McKay.”

The aide-de-camp made rather a wry face. He was not fond of Mrs. Wilders, whose manner, sometimes oily, sometimes supercilious, was too changeable to please him, and he felt that the woman was not true.

However, he went down to the cabin, where he found Mrs. Wilders, with a white, scared face, cowering in a corner as she listened to the howling of the storm.

“Is there anything the matter?” she cried, springing up as he appeared. “Is there any danger?”

“I trust not; still, it is well to be prepared.”

“For what? Do you mean that we may be lost, drowned—here, in sight of port—all of us—my dear general and myself? It is too dreadful! Why does not the captain run inside the harbour and put us on dry ground?”

“I fear it would be too great a risk to try and make the mouth of the harbour in this gale.”

“Then why don’t you seek help from some of the other ships—the men-of-war? There are plenty of them all around.”

“Every ship outside Balaclava is in the same stress as ourselves. They could spare us no help, even if we asked for it.”

“What, then, are we to do?—in Heaven’s name!”

“Trust in Providence and hope for the best! But I think—if I might suggest—it would be as well to keep the general in ignorance of our condition, which is not so very desperate after all.”

“How do you mean?”

“‘Our cables are stout,’ Captain Trejago says, and we ought to be able to ride out the storm.”

And the *Arcadia* did so gallantly all that day, in the teeth of the hurricane, which blew with unabated fury for many more hours, and in spite of the tempest-torn sea, which now ran mountains high.

All through that anxious day Trejago kept the deck, watching the sky and the storm. It was late in the afternoon when he said, with a sigh of relief—

"The wind is hauling round to the westward; I expect the gale will abate before long."

He was right, although to eyes less keen there was small comfort yet in the signs of the weather.

It was an awful scene—ships everywhere in distress: some on the point of foundering, others being dashed to pieces on the rocks. The great waves, as they raged past in fearful haste, bore upon their foaming crests great masses of wreck, the dread vestiges of terrible disasters. Amongst the floating timbers and spars, encumbered with tangles of cordage, floated great bundles of hay, the lost cargo of heavily-laden transports that had gone down.

Still, as Trejago said, there was hope at last. The gale had spent its chief force and was no longer directly on shore. The more pressing and immediate danger was over.

"It won't do to stop here, though," he went on, "not one second longer than we can help. Now that there is a slant in the wind we can run south under a close-reefed trysail and storm-jib. What say you, doctor?"

"I'll step down and see the general."

"Don't lose any time. I should like to slip my cable this next half-hour. I shan't be happy till we've got sea-room."

McKay went below with the doctor, and, while the latter sat with his patient, the aide-de-camp had a short talk with Mrs. Wilders.

“The captain wants to put to sea.”

“Never! not in this storm!”

“It is abating fast. Besides, he says it will be far safer to be running snug under storm-canvas than remaining here on this wild coast.”

“I hope he will do no such thing. It will be madness. I must speak to him at once.”

She seized a shawl, and, throwing it over her head, ran up on deck.

McKay followed her and was by her side before she had left the companion-ladder.

“Take care, pray. There is a heavy sea on still and the deck is very slippery. I will call Captain Trejago if you will wait here.”

“One moment; do not leave me, Mr. McKay. What an exciting, extraordinary scene! But how terrible!”

The yacht rode the waves gallantly: now on their crest, now in the trough between two giant rollers, and always wet with spray. Fragments of wreck still came racing by, borne swiftly by the waters and adding greatly to the horrors of the dread story they told.

“There must have been immense loss among the shipping,” said McKay. “It is a mercy and a marvel how we escaped.”

“The poor things! To be lost—cast away on this cruel, inhospitable land. How very, very sad!”

“It is safer, you see, to leave this dangerous anchorage. Do you still want the captain? He is busy there forward.”

For the moment every one was forward: they were all intent on the straining cables and the muddle of gear that would have to be cleared or cut away when they got up sail.

So Mrs. Wilders and McKay stood at the cabin companion alone—absolutely alone—with the raging elements, the whistling wind still three parts of a gale, and the cruel, driving sea.

“Shall I fetch the captain?” McKay repeated.

“No, no! Don’t disturb him; no doubt he is right. I will go below again. This is no place for me.” She took one long, last survey of the really terrifying scene, but then, quite suddenly, there burst from her an exclamation of horror.

“There! there! Mr. McKay, look: on that piece of timber—a figure, surely—some poor shipwrecked soul! Don’t you see?”

McKay, shading his eyes, gazed intently.

“No. I can make nothing out,” he said at length, shaking his head.

“How strange! I can distinguish the figure quite plainly. But never mind, Mr. McKay; only do something. Give him some help. Try to save him. Throw him a rope.”

McKay obediently seized a coil of rope, and, approaching the gunwale, said, quickly—

“Only you must show me where to throw.”

“There, towards that mast; it’s coming close alongside.”

In her eagerness she had followed him, and was close behind as he gathered up the rope in a coil to cast it.

Once, twice, thrice, he whirled it round his head, then threw it with so vigorous an action that his body bent over and his balance was lost.

He might have regained it, but at this supreme moment a distinct and unmistakeable push in the back from his companion completed his discomfiture.

He clutched wildly at the shrouds with one hand—the other still held the rope; but fruitlessly, and in an instant he fell down—far down into the vortex of the seething, swirling sea.”

“Ah, traitress!” he cried, as he sank, fully conscious, as it seemed, of the foul part she had played.

Had she really wished to drown him? Her conduct after he had disappeared bore out this conclusion.

One hasty glance around satisfied her that McKay’s fall had been unobserved. If she gave the alarm at once he might still be saved.

“Not yet!” she hissed between her teeth. “In five minutes it will be too late to help him. The waters have closed over him—let him go down, to the very bottom of the sea.”

But she was wise in her fiendish wickedness, and knew that as they had been seen last together she must account for McKay’s disappearance. At the end of an interval long enough to make rescue impossible she startled the whole yacht with her screams.

“Help! Help! Mr. McKay! He has fallen over-board!”

They came rushing aft to where she stood once more holding on to the top of the companion, and plied her with questions.

“There! there! make haste!” she cried—“for Heaven’s sake make haste!”

“A boat could hardly live in this sea,” said Captain Trejago, gravely. “Still, we must make the attempt. Who will go with me?” he asked, and volunteers soon sprang to his side.

It was a service of immense danger, but the boat was lowered, and for more than half-an-hour made such diligent search as was possible in the weather and in the sea.

After that time the boat was brought back to the yacht by its brave but disappointed crew.

“No chance for the poor chap,” said Captain Trejago, shaking his head despondingly in reply to Mrs. Wilders’s mute but eager appeal.

Soon afterwards they got up the anchor, and the yacht sped southward under a few rags of sail.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

It will be well to relieve at once the anxiety which the reader must feel—unless I have altogether failed to interest him—in the fate of my hero, Stanislas McKay.

He was not drowned when, through the fiendish intervention of Mrs. Wilders, he fell from the deck of the *Arcadia*, and was, as it seemed, swallowed up in the all-devouring sea.

He went under, it is true, but only for a moment, and, coming once more to the surface, by a few strong strokes swam to a drifting spar. To this he clung desperately, hoping against hope that he might yet be picked up from the yacht. Unhappily for him, the waves ran so high that the boat under Trejago's guidance failed to catch sight of him, and, as we

know, returned presently to the *Arcadia*, after a fruitless errand, as was thought.

Very shortly the yacht and the half-submerged man parted company. The former was steered for the open sea; the latter drifted and tossed helplessly to and fro, growing hourly weaker and more and more benumbed, but always hanging on with convulsive tenacity to the friendly timber that buoyed him up, and was his last frail chance of life.

All night long he was in the water, and when day dawned it seemed all over with him, so overpowering was his despair. Consciousness had quite abandoned him, and he was almost at the last gasp when he was seen and picked up by a passing steamship, the *Burlington Castle*.

"Where am I?" he asked, faintly, on coming to himself. He was in a snug cot, in a small but cosy cabin.

"Where you'd never have been but for the smartness of our look-out man," said a steward at his bedside. "Cast away, I suppose, in the gale?"

"No: washed overboard," replied McKay, "last evening."

"Thunder! and in the water all those hours! But what was your craft? Who and what are you?"

"I was on board the yacht *Arcadia*. My name is Stanislas McKay. I am an officer of the Royal Picts—aide-de-camp to General Wilders. Where am I?" he repeated.

“You’ll learn that fast enough; with friends, anyhow. Doctor said you weren’t to talk. But just drink this, while I tell the captain you’ve come to. He hasn’t had sight of you yet; we hauled you aboard while it was his watch below.”

Five minutes more and the captain, a jolly English tar, red in face and round in figure, came down, with a loud voice and cheering manner, to welcome his treasure-trove.

“Well, my hearty, so this is how I find you, eh? Soused in brine. Why, I hear they had to hang you up by the heels to let the water run out of your mouth. Come, Stanny, my boy, this won’t do.”

“Uncle Barto!”

“The same: master of the steamship *Burlington Castle*, deep in deals—timbers for huts—and other sundries, now lying in Balaclava, waiting to be discharged. But, my dearest lad, you’ve had a narrow squeak. Tell me, how did it happen, and when?”

“I fell overboard, and I’ve been all night in the water: that’s all.”

He did not choose as yet to make public his suspicions as to the real origin of his nearly fatal accident.

“I always said you had nine lives, Stanny, only don’t go using them up like this. There’s not a tom-cat could stand it.”

“Were you out in the gale, uncle?”

“Ay; and weathered it. At dawn, after the first puff, I knew we’d have a twister, so I got up steam and

regularly worked against it. Made a good offing that way, and when the storm abated came back here. We were close in when we picked you up on a log."

"It was a providential escape," said Stanislas, thankfully. "I thought it was all over with me."

"We'll set you up in no time, never fear. But tell more about yourself. Jove! you are a fine chap, Stanny. Why, you'll die a general yet, if the Russians 'll let you off a little longer, and you're not wanted for the House of Peers."

"What do you mean, uncle?"

"Why, of course, you haven't heard. There's trouble among your fine relations. Lord Essendine has lost all his sons."

"All?"

"Yes; all. Hugo was killed, as you know; Anastasius died at Scutari; and Lord Lydstone, two days later, was found dead in the streets of Stamboul."

"Dead? How? What did he die of, uncle?"

"A stab in the heart. He was murdered."

"And I——"

He understood now the cause of the foul blow struck at him, and the base attempt to get him also out of the way.

"You are now next heir to the peerage, in spite of all they may say. But you'll find my lord civil enough soon. He'll be wanting you to go straight home."

"And leave the army? Not while there's fighting to be done, Uncle Barto. I may not be much good as

I am, but I'll do all I can, trust me. I ought to be getting on shore and back to the front."

"My doctor will have a word to say to that. He won't let you be moved till you're well and strong."

But on the second day McKay, thanks to kindly care and plenty of nourishment, was able to leave his cot, and on the third morning he was determined to return to his duty.

"I won't baulk you, Stanny," said his uncle; "good soldiers, like good sailors, never turn their backs on their work. But mind, this ship is your home whenever and wherever you like to come on board; and if you want anything you have only to ask for it, d'ye hear?"

McKay promised readily to draw upon his uncle when needful, and then, his horse being still at Balaclava, he once more got into the saddle and rode up to camp.

The journey prepared him a little for what he found. All the way from Balaclava his horse struggled knee-deep in mud: a very quagmire of black, sticky slush. Yet this was the great highway—the only road between the base of supply and an army engaged eight miles distant in an arduous siege. Along it the whole of the food, ammunition, and material had to be carried on pony-back, or in a few ponderous carts drawn by gaunt, over-worked teams, which too often left their wheels fast-caught in the mire.

At the front—it had been raining in torrents for

hours—the mud was thicker, blacker, and more tenacious. Tents stood in pools of water ; their occupants, harassed by trench duty, lay shivering within, half-starved and wet.

McKay made his way at once to the colonel and reported his return.

“ Oh ! so you’ve thought fit to come back,” said Colonel Blythe, rather grumpily. Since war and sickness had decimated his battalion he looked upon every absentee, from whatever cause, right or wrong, as a recreant deserter.

“ I was with my general, sir,” expostulated Stanislas.

“ The general has no need of an aide-de-camp now. We want every man that can stand upright in his boots. I have given up the command of the brigade myself so as to look the better after my men.”

McKay accepted the reproof without a murmur, and only said—

“ Well, sir, I am here now, and ready to do whatever I may be called upon. I feel my first duty is to my own colonel and my own corps.”

“ Do you mean that, young fellow ?” said the colonel, thawing a little.

“ Certainly, sir.”

“ Because they want to inveigle you away—on the staff. Lord Raglan has sent to inquire for you.”

“ I have no desire to go, sir,” said McKay, simply ; although his face flushed red at the compliment implied by the Commander-in-Chief’s message.

“It seems he was pleased with the way you rallied those Frenchmen, and he has heard you are a good linguist, and he wants to put you on the staff.”

“I had much rather stay with the regiment, sir,” said McKay.

“Are you quite sure? You must not stand in your own light. This is a fine chance for you to get on in the service.” The colonel’s voice had become very friendly.

“I know where my true duty lies, sir; I owe everything to you and to the regiment. I should not hesitate to refuse an appointment on the general staff if it were offered me now.” McKay did not add that his future prospects were now materially changed, and that it was no longer of supreme importance to him to rise in his profession.

“Give me your hand, my boy,” said Colonel Blythe, visibly touched at McKay’s disinterestedness. “You are proving your gratitude in a way I shall never forget. But let us talk business. You know I want you as adjutant.”

“I shall be only too proud to act, sir.”

“I must have a good staff about me. We are in great straits; the regiment will go from bad to worse. There are barely 200 ‘duty’ men now, and it will soon be a mere skeleton, unless we can take good care of the rest.”

“Yes, sir,” said McKay, feeling constrained to say something.

“They are suffering—we all are, but the men most of all—from exposure, cold, want of proper clothing, and, above all, from want of proper food. This is what I wish to remedy. They are dying of dysentery, fever, cholera—I don’t know what.”

“The doctor, sir?”

“Can do nothing. He has few drugs; but, as he says, that would hardly matter if the men could have warmth and nourishment.”

“Something might be done, sir, with system; the quartermaster ——”

“You are right. Let us consult him. Hyde is still acting, and he has already proved himself a shrewd, hard-headed old soldier.”

Quartermaster-sergeant Hyde—for he had accepted the grade, although unwillingly—came and stood “at attention” before his superiors.

“As to food, sir,” he said, “the men might be provided with hot coffee, and, I think, hot soup, on coming off duty. I am only doubtful as to the sufficiency of fuel.”

“There is any quantity of drift-wood just now—wreckage—floating in Balaclava Harbour,” suggested McKay.

“We must have it sir, somehow,” said Hyde, eagerly. “But can we get it up to the front?”

“We’ll lay an embargo on all the baggage-animals in camp. Take the whole lot down to Balaclava, and lay hands on every scrap of timber.”

“As to clothing, sir, an uncle of mine has come up with a heavily-laden ship—hutting-timbers mostly, but he may have some spare blankets, sailors’ pea-jackets, jerseys, and so forth.”

“And boots, long boots or short—all kinds will be acceptable. Get anything and everything that is warm. I’ll pay out of my own pocket sooner than not have them. When can you start, Hyde?”

“Now, sir, if that will suit Mr. McKay, and I can have the horses.”

The matter was speedily arranged, and in the early afternoon our hero and Hyde were jogging back to Balaclava, at the head of a string of animals led and ridden by a small selected fatigue-party of regimental batmen and grooms.

It was the first occasion on which the two friends had conversed freely together for months.

McKay had most to tell. He spoke first of the offer to go on the headquarter-staff which he had refused. Then of the strange accidents by which he had become heir presumptive to the earldom of Essendine. Last of all, of the narrow escape he had of his life.

Hyde pressed him on this point.

“You fell overboard—lost your balance, eh? Entirely your own doing? Mrs. Wilders did not help you at all?”

“How on earth, Hyde, did you guess that? I never hinted at such a thing.”

“I know her—do not look surprised—I know her,

and have done so intimately for years. There is nothing she would stick at if she saw her advantage therefrom. You were in her way; she sought to remove you, as, no doubt, she, or some one acting for her, had removed Lord Lydstone, and—and—for all I know, ever so many more.”

“Can she be such a fiendish wretch?”

“She is a demon, Stanislas McKay. Beware how you cross her path. But let her also take heed how she tries to injure you again. She will have to do with me then.”

“Why, Hyde! what extraordinary language is this? What do you know of Mrs. Wilders? What can you mean?”

“Some day you shall hear everything, but not now. It is too long a story. Besides, here we are at Balaclava. Do you know where your uncle’s ship lies?”

CHAPTER XX.

RED TAPE.

“WHAT! back again so soon, Stanny,” was Captain Faulks’s greeting as McKay stepped on board the *Burlington Castle*. “I am right glad to see you. Is that a friend of yours?” pointing to Hyde. “He is welcome too. What brings you to Balaclava?”

McKay explained in a few words the errand on which they had come.

“Drift-wood—is that what you’re after? All right, my hearties, I can help you to what you want. My crew is standing idle, and I will send the second officer out with them in the boats. They can land it for you, and load up your horses.”

Before the afternoon Hyde started for the camp with a plentiful supply of fuel, intending to return next

morning to take up any other supplies that could be secured. McKay tackled his uncle on this subject that same evening.

"Blankets? Yes, my boy, you shall have all we can spare, and I daresay we can fit you out with a few dozen jerseys, and perhaps some seamen's boots."

"We want all the warm clothing we can get," said McKay. "The men are being frozen to death."

"I tell you what: there were five cases of sheepskin-jackets I brought up—*greggos*, I think they call them—what those Tartar chaps wear in Bulgaria."

"The very thing! Let's have them, uncle."

"I wish you could, lad; but they are landed and gone into the store."

"The commissariat store? I'll go after them in the morning."

"It'll trouble you to get them. He is a hard nut, that commissariat officer, as you'll see."

Mr. Dawber, the gentleman in question, was a middle-aged officer of long standing, who had been brought up in the strictest notions of professional routine. He had regulations on the brain. He was a slave to red tape, and was prepared to die rather than diverge from the narrow grooves in which he had been trained.

The store over which he presided was in a state of indescribable chaos. It could not be arranged as he had seen stores all his life, so he did nothing to it at all.

When McKay arrived early next day, Mr. Dawber

was being interviewed by a doctor from a hospital-ship. The discussion had already grown rather serious.

"I tell you my patients are dying of cold," said the doctor. "I must have the stoves."

"It is quite impossible," replied Mr. Dawber, "without a requisition properly signed."

"By whom?"

"It's not my place, sir, to teach you the regulations, but if you refer to page 347, paragraph 6, you will find that no demands can be complied with unless they have been through the commanding officer of the troops, the senior surgeon, the principal medical officer, the senior commissariat officer, the brigadier, and the general of division. Bring me a requisition duly completed, and you shall have the stoves."

"But it is monstrous: preposterous! There is not time. It would take a week to get these signatures, and I tell you my men are dying."

"I can't help that; you must proceed according to rule."

"It's little short of murder!" said the doctor, now furious.

"And what can I do for you?" said Mr. Dawber, ignoring this remark, and turning to another applicant, a quartermaster of the Guards.

"I have come for six bags of coffee."

"Where is your requisition?"

The quartermaster produced a large sheet of foolscap, covered with printing and ruled lines, a mass of figures, and intricate calculations.

Mr. Dawber seized it, and proceeded to verify the totals, which took him half-an-hour.

"This column is incorrectly cast; in fact, the form is very carelessly filled in. But you shall have the coffee—if we can find it."

Further long delay followed, during which Mr. Dawber and his assistant rummaged the heterogeneous contents of his overcrowded store, and at last he produced five bags, saying—

"You will have to do with this."

"But it is green coffee," said the quartermaster, protesting. "How are we to roast it?"

"That's not my business. The coffee is always issued in the green berry. You will find that it preserves its aroma better when roasted just before use."

"We should have to burn our tent-poles or musket-stocks to cook it," said the quartermaster. "That stuff's no use to me," and he went away grumbling, leaving the bags behind him.

McKay followed him out of the store.

"You won't take the coffee, then?"

"Certainly not. I wish I had the people here that sent out such stuff."

"May I have it?"

"If you like. It's all one to me."

"Give me the requisition, then."

Armed with this important document, he returned, and accosted Mr. Dawber.

"He has changed his mind about the coffee. You

can give it to me ; I will see that he gets it. Here is the requisition."

The commissariat officer was only too pleased to get rid of the bags according to form.

McKay next attacked him about the *greggos*. Despairing, after all he had heard, of getting them by fair means, he resolved to try a stratagem.

"You received yesterday, I believe, a consignment from the *Burlington Castle*?"

"Quite so. There are the chests, still unpacked. I have not the least idea what's inside."

"You have the bill of lading, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"May I look at it? I come from the *Burlington Castle*, and the captain thinks he was wrong to have sent you the cases without passing the bill of lading through the commissariat officer at headquarters."

"I believe he is right. Here is the bill ; it has not Mr. Fielder's signature. This is most irregular. What shall I do?"

"You had better give me back the bill of lading and the cases until the proper formalities have been observed."

"You are perfectly right, my dear sir, and I am extremely obliged to you for your suggestion."

A few minutes later McKay had possession of the cases. With the help of some of his uncle's crew he moved them back to the seaside, where he waited until Hyde's arrival from the front. Then they loaded up

the *greggos* on the baggage-animals, and returned to camp in triumph.

From that day the men of the Royal Picts were fairly well off. Their condition was not exactly comfortable, but they suffered far less than the bulk of their comrades in the Crimea.

Their sheepskin-jackets were not very military in appearance, but they were warm, and their heavy seamen's boots kept out the wet. They had a sufficiency of food, too, served hot, and prepared with rough-and-ready skill, under the superintendence of Hyde.

He had struck up a great friendship with a Frenchman, one of the *Voltigeurs*, in a neighbouring camp, who, in return for occasional nips of sound brandy, brought straight from the *Burlington Castle*, freely imparted the whole of his culinary knowledge to the quartermaster of the Royal Picts.

"He is a first-class cook," said Hyde to his friend McKay, "and was trained, he tells me, in one of the best kitchens in Paris. He could make soup, I believe, out of an old shoe."

"I can't think how you get the materials for the men's meals. That stew yesterday was never made out of the ration-biscuit and salt pork. There was fresh meat in it. Where did you get it?"

Old Hyde winked gravely.

"If I were to tell you it would get about, and the men would not touch it."

"You can trust me. Out with it."

“There’s lots of fresh meat to be got in the camp by those who know where to look for it. Anatole”—this was his French friend—“put me up to it.”

“I don’t understand, Hyde. What do you mean?”

“I mean that her Majesty’s Royal Picts have been feeding upon horseflesh. And very excellent meat, too, full of nourishment when it is not too thin. That is my chief difficulty with what I get.”

“It’s only prejudice, I suppose,” said McKay, laughing; “but it will be as well, I think, to keep your secret.”

But horseflesh was better than no meat, and the men of the Royal Picts thrived well and kept their strength upon Hyde’s soups and savoury stews. Thanks to the care bestowed upon them, the regiment kept up its numbers in a marvellous way—it even returned more men for duty than corps which had just arrived, and the difference between it and others in the camp-grounds close by was so marked that Lord Raglan came over and complimented Blythe upon the condition of his command.

“I can’t tell how you manage, Blythe,” said his lordship; “I wish we had a few more regiments like the Picts.”

“It is all system, my lord, and I have reason, I think, to be proud of ours—that and an excellent regimental staff. I have a capital quartermaster and a first-rate adjutant.”

“I should like to see them,” said Lord Raglan.

McKay and Hyde were brought forward and presented to the Commander-in-Chief.

"Mr. McKay, I know your name. You behaved admirably at Inkerman. I have just had a letter, too, about you from England."

"About me, my lord?" said Stanislas, astonished.

"Yes, from Lord Essendine, your cousin. And, to oblige him, no less than on your own account, I must renew my offer of an appointment on the headquarter staff."

McKay looked at the colonel and shook his head.

"You are very good, my lord, but I prefer to stay with my regiment."

"Colonel Blythe, you really must spare him to me," said Lord Raglan. "We want him, and more of his stamp."

"Your wishes are law, my lord. I should prefer to keep Mr. McKay, but I will not stand in his way if he desires to go. I shall not miss him so much now that everything is in good working order."

McKay was disposed still to protest, but Lord Raglan cut him short by saying—

"Come over to headquarters to-morrow, and report yourself to General Airey. As for you, my fine fellow," Lord Raglan went on, turning to Hyde, "you are still a non-commissioned officer, I see."

"Yes, my lord, I am only acting-quartermaster."

"Well, I shall recommend you for a commission at once."

"I do not want promotion, my lord," replied Hyde.

"He has refused it several times," added Blythe.

“That’s all nonsense ! He must take it ; it’s for the good of the service. I shall send forward your name,” and, so saying, Lord Raglan rode off.

Stanislas took up his duties at headquarters next day. He was attached to the quartermaster-general’s department, and was at once closely examined as to his capabilities and qualifications by his new chief, General Airey, a man of extraordinarily quick perception, and a shrewd judge of character.

“You speak French ? Fluently ? Let’s see,” and the general changed the conversation to that language. “That’s all right. What else ? Italian ? German ? Russian ?——”

“Yes, sir, Russian.”

“You ought to be very useful to us. But you will have to work hard, Mr. McKay, very hard. There are no drones here.”

McKay soon found that out. From daybreak to midnight every one at headquarters slaved incessantly. Horses stood ready saddled in the stables, and officers came and went at all hours. Men needed to possess iron constitution and indomitable energy to meet the demands upon their strength.

“Lord Raglan wants somebody to go at once to Kamiesch,” said General Airey, coming out one morning to the room in which his staff-assistants worked and waited for special instructions. There was no one there but McKay, and he had that instant returned from Balaclava. “Have you been out this morning,

Mr. McKay? Yes? Well, it can't be helped; you must go again."

"I am only too ready, sir."

"That's right. Lord Raglan does not spare himself, neither must you."

"I know, sir. How disgraceful it is that he should be attacked by the London newspapers and accused of doing nothing at all!"

"Yes, indeed! Why, he was writing by candle-light at six o'clock this morning, and after breakfast he saw us all, the heads of departments and three divisional generals. Since then he has been writing without intermission. By-and-by he will ride through the camp, seeing into everything with his own eyes."

"His lordship is indefatigable: it is the least we can do to follow his example," said McKay, as he hurried away.

This was one of many such conversations between our hero and his new chief. By degrees the quarter-master-general came to value the common-sense opinion of this practical young soldier, and to discuss with him unreservedly the more pressing needs of the hour.

There was as yet no improvement in the state of the Crimean army; on the contrary, as winter advanced, it deteriorated, pursued still by perverse ill-luck. The weather was terribly inclement, alternating between extremes. Heavy snowstorms and hard frosts were followed by thaws and drenching rains. The difficulties of transport continued supreme. Roads, mere spongy

sloughs of despond, were nearly impassable, and the waste of baggage-animals was so great that soon few would remain.

To replace them with fresh supplies became of paramount importance.

"We must draw upon neighbouring countries," said General Airey, talking it over one day with McKay. "It ought to have been done sooner. But better now than not at all. I will send to the Levant, to Constantinople, Italy ——"

"Spain," suggested McKay.

"To be sure! What do you suppose we could get from Spain?"

"Thousands of mules and plenty of horses."

"It is worth thinking of, although the distance is great," replied the quartermaster-general. "I will speak to Lord Raglan at once on the subject. By-the-way, I think you know Spanish?"

"Yes," said McKay, "fairly well."

"Then you had better get ready to start. If any one goes, I will send you."

This was tantamount to an order. General Airey's advice was certain to be taken by Lord Raglan.

Next morning McKay started for Gibraltar, specially accredited to the Governor of the fortress, and with full powers to buy and forward baggage-animals as expeditiously as possible.

CHAPTER XXI.

AGAIN ON THE ROCK.

McKAY travelled as far as Constantinople in one of the man-of-war despatch-boats used for the postal service. There he changed into a transport homeward bound, and proceeded on his voyage without delay.

But half-an-hour at Constantinople was enough to gain tidings of the *Arcadia* and her passengers.

The yacht, he learnt, had left only a week or two before. It had lingered a couple of months at the Golden Horn, during which time General Wilders lay between life and death.

Mortification at last set in, and then all hope was gone. The general died, and was buried at Scutari, after which Mrs. Wilders, still utilising the *Arcadia*, started for England.

The yacht, a fast sailer, made good progress, and was already at anchor in Gibraltar Bay on the morning that McKay arrived.

“Shall I go on board and tax her with her misdeeds?” McKay asked himself. “No; she can wait. I have more pressing and more pleasant business on hand.”

His first visit was to the Convent. “You shall have every assistance from us,” said the Governor, Sir Thomas Drummond. “But what do you propose to do, and how can I help?”

“My object, sir, is to collect all the animals I can in the shortest possible time. I propose, first, to set the purchase going here—under your auspices, if you agree—then visit Alicante, Valencia, Barcelona, and ship off all I can secure.”

“An excellent plan. Well, you shall have my hearty co-operation. If there is anything else ——”

An aide-de-camp came in at this moment and whispered a few words in his general’s ear.

“What! on shore? Here in the Convent, too? Poor soul! of course we will see her. Let some one tell Lady Drummond. Forgive me, Mr. McKay: a lady has just called whom I am bound by every principle of courtesy, consideration, and compassion to see at once. Perhaps you will return later?”

McKay bowed and passed out into the antechamber. On the threshold he met Mrs. Wilders face to face.

“You ——!” she gasped out, but instantly checked

the exclamation of chagrin and dismay that rose to her lips.

“You hardly expected to see me, perhaps; but I was miraculously saved.”

McKay spoke slowly, and the delay gave Mrs. Wilders time to collect herself.

“I am most thankful. It has lifted a load off my mind. I feared you were lost.”

“Yes; the sea seldom gives up its prey. But enough about myself. You are going in to see the general, I think; do not let me detain you.”

“I shall be very pleased to see you on board the yacht.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilders; I am sure you will. But to me such a visit would be very painful. My last recollections of the *Arcadia* are not too agreeable.”

“Of course not. You were so devoted to my poor dear husband.”

Mrs. Wilders would not acknowledge his meaning.

“But I shall see you again before I leave, I trust.”

“My stay here is very short. I am only on a special mission, and I must return to the Crimea without delay. But we shall certainly meet again some day, Mrs. Wilders; you may rely on that.”

There was meaning, menace even, in this last speech, and it gave Mrs. Wilders food for serious thought.

McKay did not pause to say more. He was too eager to go elsewhere.

His first visit, as in duty bound, had been to report

his arrival and set on foot the business that had brought him. His second was to see sweet Mariquita, the girl of his choice.

They had exchanged several letters. His had been brief, hurried accounts of his doings, assuring her of his safety after every action and of his unalterable affection; hers were the artless outpourings of a warm, passionate nature tortured by ever-present heartrending anxiety for the man she loved best in the world. There had been no time to warn her of his visit to Gibraltar, and his appearance was entirely unexpected there.

Things were much the same at the cigar-shop. McKay walked boldly in and found La Zandunga, as usual, behind the counter, but alone. She got up, and, not recognising him, bowed obsequiously. Officers were rare visitors in Bombardier Lane and McKay's staff-uniform inspired respect.

"You are welcome, sir. In what can we serve you? Our tobacco is greatly esteemed. We import our cigars—the finest—direct from La Havanna; our cigarettes are made in the house."

"You do not seem to remember me," said McKay, quietly. "I hope Mariquita is well?"

"Heaven protect me! It is the Sergeant ——"

"Lieutenant, you mean."

"An officer! already! You have been fortunate, sir." La Zandunga spoke without cordiality and was evidently hesitating how to receive him. "What brings you here?"

"I want to see Mariquita." The old crone stared at him with stony disapproval. "I have but just arrived from the Crimea to buy horses and mules for the army."

"Many?" Her manner instantly changed. 'This was business for her husband, who dealt much in horseflesh.

"Thousands."

"Won't you be seated, sir? Let me take your hat. Mariqui—ta!" she cried, with remarkable volubility. The guest was clearly entitled to be treated with honour.

Mariquita entered hastily, expecting to be chidden, then paused shyly, seeing who was there.

"Shamefaced, come; don't you know this gentleman?" said her aunt, encouragingly. "Entertain him, little one, while I fetch your uncle."

"What does it mean?" asked Mariquita, in amazement, as soon as she could release herself from her lover's embrace. "You here, Stanislas: my aunt approving! Am I mad or asleep?"

"Neither, dearest. She sees a chance of profit out of me—that's all. I will not baulk her. She deserves it for leaving us alone," and he would have taken her again into his arms.

"No, no! Enough, Stanislas!" said the sweet girl, blushing a rosy red. "Sit there and be quiet. Tell me of yourself: why you are here. The war, then, is

over? The Holy Saints be praised! How I hated that war!”

“Do not say that, love! It has been the making of me.”

“Nothing would compensate me for all that I have suffered these last few months.”

“But I have gained my promotion and much more. I can offer you now a far higher position. You will be a lady, a great lady, some day!”

“It matters little, my Stanislas, so long as I am with you. I would have been content to share your lot, however humble, anywhere.”

This was her simple, unquestioning faith. Her love filled all her being. She belonged, heart and soul, to this man.

“You will not leave me again, Stanislas?” she went on, with tender insistence.

“My sweet, I must go back. My duty is there, in the Crimea, with my comrades—with the army of my Queen.”

“But if anything should happen to you—they may hurt you, kill you!”

“Darling, there is no fear. Be brave.”

“Oh, Stanislas! Suppose I should lose you—life would be an utter blank after that; I have no one in the world but you.”

McKay was greatly touched by this proof of her deep-seated affection.

"It is only for a little while longer, my sweetest girl! Be patient and hopeful to the end. By-and-by we shall come together, never to part again."

"I am weak, foolish—too loving, perhaps. But, Stanislas, I cannot bear to part with you. Let me go too!"

"Dearest, that is quite impossible!"

"If I was only near you ——"

"What! you—a tender woman—in that wild land, amidst all its dangers and trials!"

"I should fear nothing if it was for you, Stanislas. I would give you my life; I would lay it down freely for you."

He could find no words to thank her for such unselfish devotion, but he pressed her to his heart again and again.

He still held Mariquita's hand, and was soothing her with many endearing expressions, when La Zandunga, accompanied by Tio Pedro, returned.

The lovers flew apart, abashed at being surprised.

McKay expected nothing less than coarse abuse, but no honey could be sweeter than the old people's accents and words.

"Do not mind us," said La Zandunga, coaxingly.

"A pair of turtle-doves," said Tio Pedro: "bashful and timid as birds."

"Sit down, good sir," went on the old woman: "you can see Mariquita again. Let us talk first of this business."

“You want horses, I believe?” said Tio Pedro. “I can get you any number. What price will you pay?”

“What they are worth.”

“And a little more, which we will divide between ourselves,” added the old man, with a knowing wink.

“That’s not the way with British officers,” said McKay, sternly.

“It’s the way with ours in Spain.”

“That may be. However, I will take five hundred from you, at twenty pounds apiece, if they are delivered within three days.”

Tio Pedro got up and walked towards the door.

“I go to fetch them. I am the key of Southern Spain. When I will, every stable-door shall be unlocked. You shall have the horses, and more, if you choose, in the stated time.”

“One moment, Señor Pedro; I want something else from you, and you, señora.”

They looked at him with well-disguised astonishment.

“I have long loved your niece; will you give her to me in marriage?”

“Oh! sir, it is too great an honour for our house. We—she—are all unworthy. But if you insist, and are prepared to take her as she is, dowerless, uncultured, with only her natural gifts, she is yours.”

“I want only herself. I have sufficient means for both. They may still be modest, but I have good prospects—the very best. Some day I shall inherit a great fortune.”

"Oh! sir, you overwhelm us. We can make you no sufficient return for your great condescension. Only command us, and we will faithfully execute your wishes."

"My only desire is that you should treat Mariquita well. Take every care of her until I can return. It will not be long, I trust, before this war is ended, and then I will make her my wife."

McKay's last words were overheard by a man who at this moment entered the shop.

It was Benito, who advanced with flaming face and fierce, angry eyes towards the group at the counter.

"What is this—and your promise to me? The girl is mine; you gave her to me months ago."

"Our promise was conditional on Mariquita's consent," said La Zandunga, with clever evasion. "That you have never been able to obtain."

"I should have secured it in time but for this scoundrel who has come between me and my affianced bride. He'll have to settle with me, whoever he is," and so saying, Benito came closer to McKay, whom hitherto he had not recognised. "The Englishman!" he cried, starting back.

"Very much at your service," replied McKay, shortly. "I am not afraid of your threats. I think I can hold my own with you as I have done before."

"We shall see," and with a muttered execration, full of hatred and malice, he rushed from the place.

When, an hour or two later, Mrs. Wilders hunted him up at the Redhot Shell Ramp, she found him in a

mood fit for any desperate deed. But, with native cunning, he pretended to show reluctance when she asked him for his help.

“Who is it you hate? An Englishman? Any one on the Rock?” he said. “And what do you want done? I have no wish to bring myself within reach of the English law.”

“It is an English officer. He is here just now, but will presently return to the Crimea.”

“What is his name?” asked Benito, eagerly, his black heart inflamed with a wild hope of revenge.

“McKay—Stanislas McKay, of the Royal Picts.”

It was his name! A fierce, baleful light gleamed in Benito’s dark eyes; he clenched his fists and set his teeth fast.

“You know him?” said Mrs. Wilders, readily interpreting these signs of hate.

“I should like to kill him!” hissed Benito.

“Do so, and claim your own reward.”

“But how? When? Where?”

“That is for you to settle. Watch him, stick to him, dog his footsteps, follow him wherever he goes. Some day he must give you a chance.”

“Leave it to me. The moment will come when I shall sheathe my knife in his heart.”

“I think I can trust you. Only do it well, and never let me see him again.”

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. HOBSON CALLS.

THE *Arcadia* went direct from Gibraltar to Southampton, where Mrs. Wilders left it and returned to London.

It was necessary for her to review her position and look things in the face. Her circumstances were undoubtedly straitened since her husband's death. She had her pension as the widow of a general officer—but this was a mere pittance at best—and the interest of the small private fortune settled, at the time of the marriage, on her and her children, should she have any. Her income from both these sources amounted to barely £300 a year—far too meagre an amount according to her present ideas, burdened as she was, moreover, with the care and education of a child.

But how was she to increase it? The reversion of

the great Wilders estates still eluded her grasp; they might never come her way, whatever lengths she might go to secure them.

“Lord Essendine ought to do something for me,” she told herself, as soon as she was settled in town. “It was not fair to keep the existence of this hateful young man secret; my boy suffers by it, poor little orphan! Surely I can make a good case of this to his lordship; and, after all, the child comes next.”

She wrote accordingly to the family lawyers, Messrs. Burt and Benham, asking for an interview, and within a day or two saw the senior partner, Mr. Burt.

He was blandly sympathetic, but distant.

“Allow me to offer my deep condolence, madam; but as this is, I presume, a business visit, may I ask ——”

“I am left in great distress. I wish to appeal to Lord Essendine.”

“On what grounds?”

“My infant son is the next heir.”

“Nay; surely you know—there is another before him?”

“Before my boy! Who? What can you mean? Impossible! I have never heard a syllable of this. I shall contest it.”

It suited her to deny all knowledge, thinking it strengthened her position.

“That would be quite useless. The claims of the next heir are perfectly sound.”

“It is sheer robbery! It is scandalous, outrageous! I will go and see Lord Essendine myself.”

“Pardon me, madam; I fear that is out of the question. He is in Scotland, living in retirement. Lady Essendine’s health has failed greatly under recent afflictions.”

“He must and shall know how I am situated.”

“You may trust me to tell him, madam, at once; and, although I have no right to pledge his lordship, I think I can safely say that he will meet you in a liberal spirit.”

So it proved. Lord Essendine, after a short interval, wrote himself to Mrs. Wilders a civil, courtly letter, in which he promised her a handsome allowance, with a substantial sum in cash down to furnish a house and make herself a home.

Although still bitterly dissatisfied with her lot, she was now not only fortified against indigence, but could count on a life of comfort and ease. She established herself in a snug villa down Brompton way—a small house with a pretty garden, of the kind now fast disappearing from what was then a near suburb of the town. It was well mounted; she kept several servants, a neat brougham, and an excellent cook.

There she prepared to wait events, trusting that Russian bullet or Benito’s Spanish knife might yet rid her of the one obstacle that still stood between her son and the inheritance of great wealth.

It was with a distinct annoyance, then, while leading

this tranquil but luxurious life, that her man-servant brought in a card one afternoon, bearing the name of Hobson, and said, "The gentleman hopes you will be able to see him at once."

"How did you find me out?" she asked, angrily, when her visitor—the same Mr. Hobson we saw at Constantinople—was introduced.

"Ah! How do I find everything and everybody out? That's my affair—my business, I may say."

"And what do you want?" went on Mrs. Wilders, in the same key.

"First of all, to condole with you on the loss of so many near relatives. I missed you at Constantinople after Lord Lydstone's sad and dreadful death."

Mrs. Wilders shuddered in spite of herself.

"You suffer remorse?" he said, mockingly.

She made a gesture of protest.

"Sorrow, I should say. Yet you benefited greatly."

"On the contrary, not at all. Another life still intervenes."

"Another! and you knew nothing of it! Impossible!"

"It is too true. I am as far as ever from the accomplishment of my hopes."

"Who is this unknown interloper?"

"An English officer, at present serving in the Crimea. His name is McKay: Stanislas McKay."

“The name is familiar; the Christian name is suggestive. Do you know whether he is of Polish origin?”

“Yes, I have heard so. His father was once in the Russian army.”

“It is the same, then. There can be no doubt of it. And you would like to see him out of the way? I might help you, perhaps.”

“How? I have my own agents at work.”

“He is in the Crimea, you say?”

“Yes, or will be within a few weeks.”

“If we could inveigle him into the Russian lines he would be shot or hanged as a traitor. He is a Russian subject in arms against his Czar.”

“It would be difficult, I fear, to get him into Russian hands.”

“Some stratagem might accomplish it. You have agents at work, you say, in the Crimea?”

“They can go there.”

“Put me in communication with them, and leave it all to me.”

“You will place me under another onerous obligation, Hippolyte.”

“No, thanks. I am about to ask a favour in return. You can help me, I think.”

“Yes? Command me.”

“You have many acquaintances in London; your late husband’s friends were military men. I want a little information at times.”

Mrs. Wilders looked at him curiously.

“Why don’t you call things by their right names? You would like to employ me as a spy—is that what you mean?”

“Well, if you like to put it so, yes. I suppose I can count upon you?”

“I am sorry not to be able to oblige you, but I am afraid I must say no.”

“You are growing squeamish, Cyprienne, in your old age. To think of your having scruples!”

“I despise your sneers. It does not suit me to do what you wish, that’s all; it would be unsafe.”

“What have you to lose?”

“All this.” She waved her hand round the prettily-furnished room. “Lord Essendine has been very kind to me, and if there were any suspicions—if any rumour got about that I was employed by or for you—he would certainly withdraw the income he gives me.”

Mr. Hobson laughed quietly.

“You have given yourself away, as they say in America; you have put yourself in my hands, Cyprienne. I insist now upon your doing what I wish.”

“You shall not browbeat me!” She rose from her seat, with indignation in her face. “Leave me, or I will call the servants.”

“I shall go straight to Lord Essendine, then, and tell him all I know. How would you like that? How about your allowance, and the protection of that great

family? Don't you know, foolish woman, that you are absolutely and completely in my power?"

Mrs. Wilders made no reply. Her face was a study; many emotions struggled for mastery — fear, sullen obstinacy, and impotent rage.

"Come, be more reasonable," went on Mr. Hobson. "Our partnership is of long standing; it cannot easily be dissolved; certainly not now. After all, what is it I ask you? A few questions put adroitly to the right person, an occasional visit to some official friend; to keep your eyes and ears open, and be always on the watch. Surely, there is no great trouble, no danger, in that?"

"If you will have it so, I suppose I must agree. But where and how am I to begin?"

"I leave it all to you, my dear madam; you are much more at home in this great town than I am. I can only indicate the lines on which you should proceed."

"How shall I communicate with you?"

"Only by word of mouth. When you have anything to say, write to me—there is my address"—he pointed to his card—"Duke Street, St. James's. Write just three lines, asking me to lunch, nothing more; I shall understand."

"And about this hated McKay?"

"Let me know when he returns to the Crimea. We shall be able to hit upon a plan then. But it will

require some thought, and a reckless, unscrupulous tool."

"I know the very man. He is devoted to my interests, and a bitter enemy of McKay's."

"We shall succeed then, never fear," and with these words Mr. Hobson took his leave.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

SINCE we left him at Gibraltar McKay had led a busy life. The "Horse Purchase" was in full swing upon the north front, where, in a short space of time, many hundreds of animals were picketed ready for shipment to the East. Having set this part of his enterprise on foot, he had proceeded to the Spanish ports on the Eastern coast and repeated the process.

Alicante was the great centre of his operations on this side, and there, by means of dealers and contractors, he speedily collected a large supply of mules. They were kept in the bull-ring and the grounds adjoining, a little way out of the town. A number of native muleteers were engaged to look after them, and McKay succeeded in giving the whole body of men and mules some sort of military organisation.

They were a rough lot, these local muleteers, the scum and riff-raff of Valencia—black-muzzled, dark-skinned mongrels, half Moors, half Spaniards, lawless, turbulent, and quarrelsome.

Fights were frequent amongst them — sanguinary struggles, in which the murderous native knife played a prominent part, and both antagonists were often stabbed and slashed to death.

The local authorities looked askance at this gathering of rascaldom, and gave them a wide berth. But McKay went fearlessly amongst his reprobate followers, administering a rough-and-ready sort of discipline, and keeping them as far as possible within bounds.

It was his custom to pay a nightly visit to his charge. He went through the lines, saw that the night-patrols were on the alert, and the rest of the men quiet.

Repeatedly the overseers next him in authority cautioned him against venturing out of the town so late.

“There are evil people about,” said his head man, a worthy “scorpion,” whom he had brought with him from Gibraltar. “Your worship would do better to stay at home at night.”

“What have I to fear?” replied McKay, stoutly. “I have my revolver; I can take care of myself.”

They evidently did not think so, for it became the rule for a couple of them to escort him back to town without his knowledge.

They followed at a little distance behind him, carrying lanterns, and keeping him always in sight.

One night McKay discovered their kind intentions, and civilly, but firmly, put an end to the practice.

Next night he was attacked on his way back to the hotel. A man rushed out on him from a dark corner, and made a blow at his breast with a knife. It missed him, although his coat was cut through.

A short encounter followed. McKay was stronger than his assailant, whom he speedily disarmed; but he was not so active. The fellow managed to slip through his fingers and run; all that McKay could do was to send three shots after him, fired quickly from his revolver, and without good aim.

"Scoundrel! he has got clear away," said McKay, as he put up his weapon. "Who was it, I wonder? Not one of my own men; and yet I seemed to know him. If I did not think he was still at Gibraltar, I should say it was that miscreant Benito. I shall have to get him hanged, or he will do for me one of these days."

The pistol-shots attracted no particular attention in this deserted, dead-alive Spanish town, and McKay got back to his hotel without challenge or inquiry.

A day or two later, as the organisation of his mule-train was now complete, and transports were already arriving to embark their four-footed freight, he returned to Gibraltar, meaning to go on to the Crimea without delay.

Of course he went to Bombardier Lane, where he was received by the old people like a favourite son.

Mariquita, blushing and diffident, was scarcely able to realise that her Stanislas was now at liberty to make love to her, openly and without question.

The time, however, for their tender intercourse was all too short. McKay expected hourly the steamer that was to take him eastward, and his heart ached at the prospect of parting. As for Mariquita, she had alternated between blithe joyousness and plaintive, despairing sorrow.

"I shall never see you again, Stanislas," she went on repeating, when the last mood was on her.

"Nonsense! I have come out harmless so far; I shall do so to the end. The Russians can't hurt me."

"But you have other enemies, dearest—pitiless, vindictive, and implacable."

"Whom do you mean? Benito?"

"You know without my telling you. He has shown his enmity, then? How? Oh, Stanislas! be on your guard against that black-hearted man."

Should he tell her of his suspicions that it was Benito who had attacked him at Alicante? No; it would only aggravate her fears. But he tried, nevertheless, to verify these suspicions without letting Mariquita know the secret.

"Is Benito at Gibraltar?" he asked, quietly.

"We have not seen him for weeks. Since—since—you know, my life!—since you came to our house he

has kept away. But I heard my uncle say that he had left the Rock to buy mules. He was going, I believe, to Alicante. Did you see him there ? ”

“ I saw many ruffians of his stamp, but I did not distinguish our friend.”

“ You must never let him come near you, Stanislas. Remember what I say. He is treacherous, truculent—a very fiend.”

“ If he comes across my path I will put my heel upon him like a toad. But let us talk of something more pleasant—of you—of our future life. Shall you like to live in England, and never see the sun ? ”

“ You will be my sun, Stanislas.”

“ Then you will have to learn English.”

“ It will be easy enough if you teach me.”

“ Some day you will be a great lady—one of the greatest in London, perhaps. You’ll have a grand house, carriages, magnificent dresses, diamonds——”

“ I only want you,” she said, as she nestled closer to his side.

It was sad that stern duty should put an end to these pretty love passages, but the moment of separation arrived inexorably, and, after a sad, passionate leave-taking, McKay tore himself away.

Mariquita for days was inconsolable. She brooded constantly in a corner, weeping silent tears, utterly absorbed in her grief. They considerately left her alone. Since she had become the affianced wife of a man of McKay’s rank and position, both the termagant

aunt and cross-grained uncle had treated her with unbounded respect. They would not allow her to be vexed or worried by any one, least of all by Benito, who, as soon as the English officer was out of the way, again began to haunt the house.

It was about her that they were having high words a day or two after McKay's departure.

Mariquita overheard them.

"You shall not see her, I tell you!" said La Zandunga, with shrill determination. "The sweet child is sad and sick at heart."

"She has broken mine, as you have your word to me. I shall never be happy more."

He spoke as though he was in great distress, and his grief, if false, was certainly well feigned.

"Bah!" said old Pedro. "No man ever died of unrequited love. There are as good fish in the sea."

"I wanted this one," said Benito, in deep dejection. "No matter; I am going away. There is a fine chance yonder, and I may perhaps forget her."

"Where, then?" asked the old woman.

"In the Crimea. I start to-morrow."

"Go, in Heaven's keeping," said Tio Pedro.

"And never let us see you again," added La Zandunga, whose sentiments towards Benito had undergone an entire change in the last few months.

"May I not see her to say good-bye?"

"No, you would only agitate her."

“Do not be so cruel. I implore you to let me speak to her.”

“Be off!” said the old woman, angrily. “You are importunate and ill-bred.”

“I will not go ; I will see her first.”

“Put him out, Pedro ; by force, if he will not go quietly.”

Tio Pedro rose rather reluctantly and advanced towards Benito.

“Hands off !” cried the young man, savagely striking at Pedro.

“What! You dare!” said the other furiously. “I am not too old to deal with such a stripling. Begone, I say, quicker than that!” and Tio Pedro pushed Benito towards the door.

There was a struggle, but it was of short duration. Within a few seconds Benito was ejected into the street.

By-and-by, when the coast was clear, and Mariquita felt safe from the intrusion of the man she loathed, she came out into the shop.

By this time the place was quiet. Tio Pedro had gone off to a neighbouring wine-shop to exaggerate his recent prowess, and La Zandunga sat alone behind the counter.

“Where is Benito? Has he gone?” asked Mariquita, nervously.

“Yes. Did he frighten my sweet bird?” said her

aunt, soothing her. "He is an indecent, ill-mannered rogue, and we shall be well rid of him."

"Well rid of him? He really leaves us, then? For the Crimea?"

"You have guessed it. Yes. He thinks there is a chance of finding fortune there."

Was that his only reason? Mariquita put her hand upon her heart, which had almost ceased beating. She was sick with apprehension. Did not Benito's departure forebode evil for her lover?

Just then her eye fell upon a piece of crumpled paper lying on the floor—part of a letter, it seemed. Almost mechanically—with no special intention at least—she stooped to pick it up.

"What have you got there?" asked her aunt.

"A letter."

"It must be Benito's; he probably dropped it in the scuffle. Do you know that he dared to raise his hand against my worthy husband?"

"If it is Benito's I have no desire to touch it," said Mariquita, disdainfully.

"Throw it into the yard, then," said her aunt.

Mariquita accordingly went to the back door and out into the garden, round which she walked listlessly, once or twice, forgetting what she held in her hand.

Then she looked at it in an aimless, absent way, and began to read some of the words.

The letter was in Spanish, written in a female hand. It said—

“Wait till he goes back to the Crimea, then follow him instantly. On arrival at Balaclava go at once to the Maltese baker whose shop is at the head of the bay near Kadikoi; he will give you employment. This will explain and cover your presence in the camp. You will visit all parts of it, selling bread. You must hang about the English headquarters; he is most often there; and remember that he is the sole object of your errand. You must know at all times where he is and what he is doing.

“Further instructions will reach you through the baker in the Crimea. Obey them to the letter, and you will receive a double reward. Money to any amount shall be yours, and you will have had your revenge upon the man who has robbed you of your love.”

After reading this carefully there was no doubt in Mariquita's mind that Benito's mission was directed against McKay. Her first thought was the urgency of the danger that threatened her lover; the second, an eager desire to put him on his guard. But how was she to do this? By letter? There was no time. By a trusty messenger? But whom could she send? There was no one from whom she could seek advice or assistance save the old people; and in her heart, notwithstanding their present extreme civility, she mistrusted both.

She was sorely puzzled what to do, but yet resolved to save her lover somehow, even at the risk of her own life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT MOTHER CHARCOAL'S.

WITH the return of spring brighter days dawned for the British troops in the East. The worst troubles were ended; supplies of all kinds were now flowing in in great profusion; the means of transport to the front were enormously increased and improved, not only by the opportune arrival of great drafts of baggage-animals, through the exertions of men like McKay, but by the construction of a railway for goods traffic.

The chief difficulty, however, still remained unsolved: the siege still slowly dragged itself along. Sebastopol refused to fall, and, with its gallant garrison under the indomitable Todleben, still obstinately kept the Allies at bay.

The besiegers' lines were, however, slowly but surely

tightening round the place. Many miles of trenches were now open and innumerable batteries had been built and armed. The struggle daily became closer and more strenuously maintained. The opposing forces—besiegers and besieged—were in constant collision. Sharpshooters interchanged shots all day long, and guns answered guns. The Russians made frequent sorties by night; and every day there were hand-to-hand conflicts for the possession of rifle-pits and the more advanced posts.

It was a dreary, disappointing season. This siege seemed interminable. No one saw the end of it. All alike—from generals to common men—were despondent and dispirited with the weariness of hope long deferred.

Why did we not attack the place? This was the burden of every song. The attack—always imminent, always postponed—was the one topic of conversation wherever soldiers met and talked together.

It was debated and discussed seriously, and from every point of view, in the council-chamber, where Lord Raglan met his colleagues and the great officers of the staff. It was the gossip round the camp-fire, where men beguiled the weary hours of trench-duty. It was tossed from mouth to mouth by thoughtless subalterns as they galloped on their Tartar ponies for a day's outing to Kamiesch, when released from sterner toil.

The attack! To-morrow — next day — some day — never! So it went on, with a wearisome, monotonous sameness that was perfectly exasperating.

"I give you Good-day, my friend. Well, you see the summer is now close at hand, and still we are on the wrong side of the wall."

The speaker was M. Anatole Belhomme, Hyde's French friend. They had met outside a drinking-booth in the hut-town of Kadikoi. Hyde was riding a pony; the other was on foot.

"Ah! my gallant Gaul, is it you?" replied Hyde. "Let's go in and jingle glasses together, hey?"

"A little tear of cognac would not be amiss," replied the Frenchman, whose excessive fondness for the fermented liquor of his country was the chief cause of his finding himself a sergeant in the Voltigeurs instead of chief cook to a Parisian restaurant or an English duke.

Hyde hitched up his pony at the door, and they entered the booth, seating themselves at one of the tables, if the two inverted wine-boxes used for the purpose deserved the name. There were other soldiers about, mostly British: a couple of sergeants of the Guards, an assistant of the provost-marshal, some of the new Land Transport Corps, and one or two Sardinians, in their picturesque green tunics and cocked hats with great plumes of black feathers.

The demand for drink was incessant and kept the attendants busy. There were only two of them: the proprietress, a dark-skinned lady, familiarly termed Mother Charcoal, and a mite of a boy whom the English customers called the "imp" and the French *polisson* (rogue).

Mother Charcoal was a stout but comely negress, hailing originally from Jamaica, who had come to Constantinople as stewardess in one of the transport-ships. Being of an enterprising nature, she had hastened to the seat of war and sunk all her ready-money in opening a canteen. She was soon very popular with the allied troops of every nationality and did a roaring trade.

"Some brandy — your best, my black Venus!" shouted Hyde.

"Who you call names? Me no Venus."

"Well, Mrs. Charcoal, then; that name suits your colour."

"What colour? You call me coloured? I no common nigger, let me tell you, sah; I a Georgetown lady. Me wash for officers' wives and give dignity-balls in my own home. Black Venus! Charcoal! You call me my right name. Sophimisby Cleopatra Plantagenet Sprotts: that my right name."

"Well, Mrs. S. C. P. S., I can't get my tongue round them all; fetch the brandy or send it. We will talk about your pedigree and Christian names some other time."

This chaffing colloquy had raised a general laugh and put Hyde on good terms with the company.

"What news from the front, sergeant?" asked one of the Land Transport Corps, a new comer.

"Nothing much on our side, except that they say there will be a new bombardment in a few days. But

the French were pretty busy last night, to judge from the firing."

"What was it?"

"Perhaps our friend here can tell you," and he turned to Anatole, asking the question in French.

"A glorious affair, truly!" replied the Frenchman, delighted to have an opportunity of launching out.

"I was there—I, who speak to you."

"Tell us about it," said Hyde; "I will interpret it to these gentlemen."

"The Russians, you must understand, have been forming ambuscades in front of our bastion Du Mât, which have given us infinite trouble. Last night we attacked them in three columns, 10,000 strong, and drove them out."

"Well done!"

"It was splendidly done!" went on Anatole, bombastically. "Three times the enemy tried to retake their ambuscades; three times we beat them back at the point of the bayonet, so!"

And the excitable Frenchman jumped from his seat and went through the pantomime of charging with the bayonet.

"You lost many men?"

"Thousands. What matter? we have many more to come. The Imperial Guard has landed, and the reserve, are at Constantinople."

"Yes, and there are the 'Sardines,'" said another pointing to the new uniform.

"Plenty of new arrivals. M. Soyer, the great cook, landed yesterday."

"What on earth brings him?"

"He is going to teach the troops to make omelettes and biscuit-soup."

"We were ahead of him in that, I think," said Hyde, winking at Anatole.

"He is with Miss Nightingale, you know, who has come out as head nurse."

"Heaven bless her!"

"Well, for all the new arrivals, we don't get on very fast with the siege."

"Why don't they go into the place, without all this shilly-shallying?" cried an impetuous Briton. "We'd take the place—we, the rank and file—if the generals only would let us do the work alone."

"They are a poor lot, the generals, I say."

"Halt, there! not a word against Lord Raglan," cried Hyde.

"He is so slow."

"Yes, but he is uncommon sure. Have you ever seen him in action? I have. He knows how to command: so quiet and self-possessed. Such a different man from the French generals, who always shout and swear and make such a confounded row. What do you think of your generals, Anatole?"

"Canrobert is an imbecile; he never knows his own mind."

"Well, we shan't be troubled with him much longer,"

said a fresh arrival. "Canrobert has just resigned the chief command."

"Impossible!" said Anatole, when the news was interpreted to him.

"It is perfectly true, I assure you," replied the last speaker. "I have just come from the English headquarters, and saw the new French commander-in-chief there. Palliser, I think they call him."

"Pélissier," said the French sergeant, correcting him. "That is good news. A rare old dog of war that. We shan't wait long to attack if he has the ordering."

"They say the Russian generals have changed lately. Gortschakoff has succeeded Mentschikoff."

"Confound those koffs! They are worse than a cold in the head."

"And just as difficult to get rid of. I'd like to wring their necks, and every Russian's at Sebastopol."

"Mentschikoff could not have been a bad fellow, anyway."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, one of our officers who was taken prisoner at Inkerman has just come back to camp. I heard him say that while he was in Sebastopol he got a letter from his young woman at home. She said she hoped he would take Mentschikoff prisoner, and send her home a button off his coat."

"Well?"

"The letter was read by the Russian authorities

before they gave it him, and some one told the general what the English girl had said."

"He got mad, I suppose?"

"Not at all. He sent on the letter to its destination, with a note of his own, presenting his compliments, and regrets that he could not allow himself to be taken prisoner, but saying that he had much pleasure in inclosing the button, for transmission to England."

"A regular old brick, and no mistake! We'll drink his health."

It was drunk with full honours, after which Hyde, finding the party inclined to be rather too noisy, got up to go.

"Here!" he cried out, "some of you. What have I got to pay? Hurry up, my dusky duchess; I want to be off. Come, don't keep me waiting all day," and he struck the table impatiently with his riding-whip.

Mother Charcoal's assistant, "the imp," ran up.

"How much?"

"One dollar: four shilling," said the lad, in broken English.

"There's your money!" cried Hyde, throwing it down, "and a 'bob' for yourself. Stop!" he added. "Who and what are you? I have seen you before."

The lad, a mere boy, frail-looking and slightly built, but with a handsome, rather effeminate-looking face, tried to slink away.

"What's your name?" went on Hyde.

"Pongo," replied the boy.

"That's no real name. Smacks of the West Coast of Africa. Who gave it you?"

"Mother Charcoal."

"What's your country? What language do you talk?"

"English."

"Monstrous little of that, my boy. What's your native lingo, I mean? Greek, Turkish, Italian, Coptic—what?"

"Spanish," the boy confessed, in a low voice.

Hyde looked at him very intently for a few seconds; then, without further remark, walked out with his French friend.

But he did not do more than say good-bye outside the shanty; and, leaving his horse still hitched up near the door, he presently re-entered the canteen.

The place had emptied considerably, and he was able to take his seat again in a corner without attracting much attention. For half-an-hour or more he watched this boy, who seemed to interest him so much.

"There's not a doubt of it. I must know what it means," and he beckoned the "imp" towards him.

"How did you get to the Crimea?" he asked, abruptly, speaking in excellent Spanish, when the lad, shyly and most reluctantly, came up to him. "What brings you here? I must and will know. It is very wrong. This is no place for you."

“I came to save him; he is in pressing danger,” said the boy, whose large eyes were now filled with tears.

“Does he know you are in the Crimea?”

“I have been unable to find him. I lost all my money; it was stolen from me directly I landed, and, if I had not found this place with the black woman, I should have starved.”

“Poor child! Alone and unprotected in this terrible place. It was sheer madness your coming.”

“But I could tell him in no other way.”

“Tell him what?”

“He has two bitter and implacable enemies, who are sworn to take his life.”

Hyde shook his head gravely.

“It is true, as Heaven is my witness—perfectly true. But read this if you doubt me,” and the boy, who was no other than Mariquita in disguise, produced the scrap of paper she had picked up in the shop in Bombardier Lane.

“I did not doubt your words. I was thinking of those enemies—one of them, at least—and wondering why she is permitted to live.”

He took the letter, and read it slowly.

“Her handwriting! I was sure of it. To whom was this addressed?”

“Benito Villegas. Perhaps you know him—he is a native of the Rock.”

“I remember him years ago. And has he carried out these instructions? Is he here?”

"I cannot make out. I have looked for him, but have been unable to find him."

"Not at the address stated here? You have been to it?"

"Several times, but have never seen him."

"He is probably in some disguise; that would suit his purpose best. We will hunt him up, never fear. But Stanislas must first be warned."

"You will go to him—at once?"

"This very day. And you—won't you come too?"

"No, no! I cannot." Mariquita blushed crimson. "He would chide me. It is wrong, I know; I have no right to be here, but he was in such danger. I risked everything: his displeasure, my life, my good name."

"Yes," said Hyde, thoughtfully; "this is no place for you; it is a pity you came to it. Still, we should not have known but for you; as it is, you had better stay here."

"With Mother Charcoal?"

"Just so. She is a worthy old soul, and can be trusted. It will be best, I think, to tell her the exact state of the case. Leave that to me."

"You will not delay in warning Stanislas?" said Mariquita, placing her hand on his arm.

"No; I will go directly after I have spoken to our black friend. Be easy in your mind, little woman, or Señor Pongo, or whatever you like to be called, and expect to see me again, and perhaps some one else you know, within a day or two from now."

Fate, however, decreed that Hyde should be unavoidably delayed in his errand of warning.

On leaving Mother Charcoal's shanty the second time, he found that his horse had disappeared. It had been hitched up to a hook near the doorway, in company with several others, and all were now gone.

"Some mistake? Scarcely that. One of those rascally sailor thieves, rather; not a four-footed beast is safe from them. What a nuisance it is! I suppose I must walk back to camp."

What chafed Hyde most was the delay in getting to headquarters. He had already made up his mind to find McKay as soon as he could, and tell him exactly what had occurred.

"He will, of course, think first of Mariquita; but that matter can be easily settled. We will send her on board one of the hospital-ships, where she will be with nurses of her own sex. What is really urgent is that McKay should look to himself. We must manage, through his interest and authority, to make a thorough search for this villain Benito, and get him expelled from the Crimea. That would make McKay safe, if only for a time, although I suppose Cyprienne would soon devise some new and more diabolical scheme. If I could only get on a little faster! It is most annoying about the horse. I will go straight to headquarters on foot, taking the camp of the Naval Brigade on my way."

There was wisdom in this last resolution. The

sailors' camp was the Crimean pound. All animals lost or strayed, or, more exactly, stolen, if the truth is to be told, found their way to it. Jack did a large business in horseflesh. Often enough a man, having traced his missing property, was obliged to buy it back for a few shillings, or a glass or two of grog.

It was a general joke in the Crimea that the infantry were better mounted than the cavalry, and that the sailors had the pick of the infantry horses.

"I suppose I must go to the sailors' camp, but it's rather out of my road," said Hyde, as he trudged along under the hot sun.

Many more fortunate comrades, all mounted, overtook and passed him on the way. Each time he heard the sound of hoofs his rage increased against the dishonest rogue who had robbed him of his pony.

"Like a lift, guv'ner?" said a voice behind him. "You shall have this tit chape. Half a sov., money down."

Hyde turned, and saw a blue-jacket astride of the missing pony.

"Buy it, you rascal! why it belongs to me! Where did you get it?"

"I found it, yer honour."

"Stole it, you mean. Get off this instant, or I'll give you up to the provost!" And, so saying, Hyde put out his hand to seize the reins.

"Avast heaving there, commodore," said Jack, digging his heels into the horse, and lifting it cleverly

just out of Hyde's reach. "Who finds keeps. Pay up, or you shan't have him. Why, I deserve a pound for looking after the dumb baste."

Hyde looked around for help, but no one was in sight. He was not to be baulked, however, and made a fresh attempt to get alongside the pony. But each time the sailor forged a little ahead, and this tantalising game continued for half-an-hour.

At last, disgusted and despairing, Hyde thought it better to make terms. He was losing valuable time.

"I give in, you rogue! Pull up, and you shall have your money."

"Honour bright, guv'ner?"

"Here it is," said Hyde, taking out the money.

"It's a fair swap. Hand over the money."

"No; you give up the pony first."

"I shan't. That's not my way of doing business."

"You shall!" cried Hyde, who had been edging up towards the sailor, and now suddenly made a grab at his leg.

He caught it, and held it with an iron grip. But Jack was not disposed to yield quietly. With a loud oath, he struck viciously at the pony's side with his disengaged foot.

It was a lively little beast, and went off at once, Hyde still clinging tenaciously to his prey.

But Jack was determined not to be beaten. With one hand he tried to beat off Hyde, and with the other incited the pony to increase its pace.

In the end Hyde was thrown to the ground, and received two nasty kicks—one in the forehead, the other in the breast—from the heels of the excited horse.

The sailor got clear away, and our friend Hyde was picked up senseless half-an-hour later by a passing ambulance-cart, and carried back to camp.

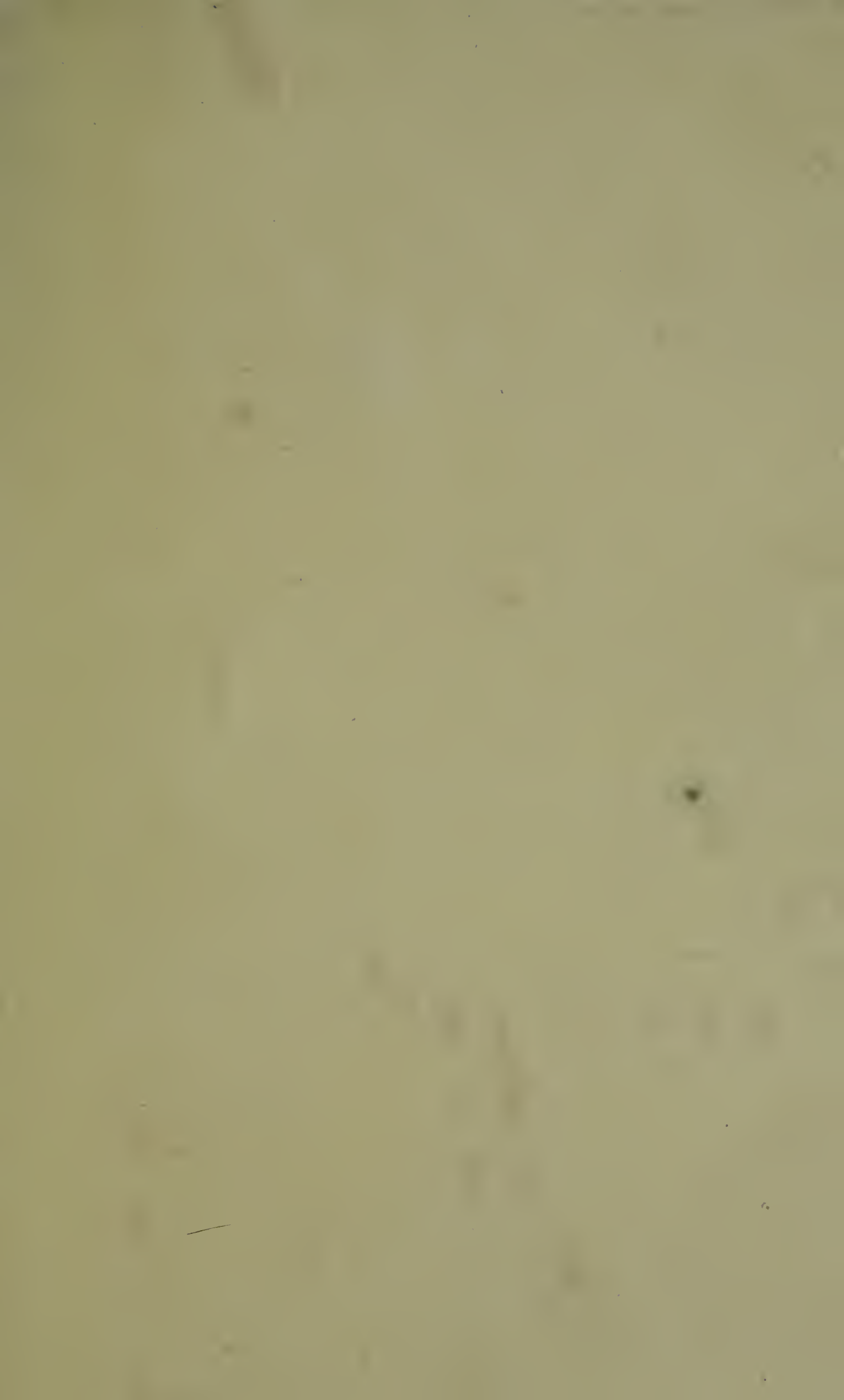
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